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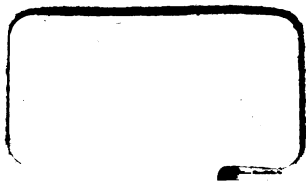
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# THOMAS.

BY

H.B. CRESWELL

KD 2576







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# THOMAS

BY  
H. B. CRESWELL



NEW YORK  
Robert M. McBride & Company  
1919

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KD 2506

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**TO  
E. J. F.  
STANTON**





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# THOMAS

## CHAPTER I

### MY MOTHER RUBS IT IN

**I**N my experience the most difficult question a man is called upon to decide is whether he shall, or shall not, marry. It is not as if there were any middle course: there is none. At a precise moment in the marriage service—marked in some rituals by the firing of a pistol—you are married. Up to that point you may scream and be let off. Beyond that point you may scream, but it is of no use. Marriage is a definite act: you have to make up your mind one way or the other. It is very difficult indeed to come to this decision, and no one who has not actually lived through the experience can have any conception of the strain and weariness of it all.

For instance, you get up in the morning feeling absolutely fit. Your skin is as tight as a drum; you see your dear old, clean, pink jowls coming to view behind the razor, and you say: "No, I'm dashed if

I do." Later in the day it may snow, or you miss a train, and you begin to feel sorry you have decided not to do it. Then perhaps in the evening, sitting in front of the fire after dinner, you begin to be mournful. You think of the good old days that are gone, and then you decide: "Yes, by jove, I will—I'll do it." The more thoughtful a man is the more he suffers. The harder I think about it the more I don't know what to do. I ask myself repeatedly, "Why not?" Then again, on the other hand, "Why?" And so on backwards and forwards; forwards and back. It makes me sigh.

My difficulty in making up my mind is increased by mother, or I should rather say that it is probably due to her that I trouble my head on the matter at all. If one doesn't want to be married, well—don't marry; if one does, well—do it. That seems easy enough! My trouble is, however, that a day rarely passes but my mother reminds me, by some conversational nudge, that I ought to be married, or know the reason why not.

It would be all right if my dear mother would say outright, "Get married, you ass!" or convey her advice in some other direct way: I could then discuss the matter with her and get ballast, no doubt, from her mellowed experience. But the deadly thing about my mother is her insuperable *tact*. Never to say a thing; always to imply it, and never to mean anything if challenged, is her system. "Tact at all costs" is her guiding principle and my confusion.

The scene at breakfast this morning was not in any way out of the ordinary. The same sort of thing happens nearly every day, and I shall probably have another whiff of Ferdinand before I go to bed. I merely report today's breakfast as an illustration of tomorrow's dinner or next Saturday's lunch. These attacks by my mother have gradually become formidable. In short she is beginning to warm to her purpose, and I am finding it difficult to keep my end up.

I have to explain that this lady is not really my mother, but my stepmother. She is, however, the only mother I have ever known; and, as she has brought me up in strict observance of filial obligations, we are mother and son by long confirmed habit.

Breakfast was nearly over when I entered the room. Before I could shut the door my mother exclaimed in a voice thrilling with exultation:

"I've got news for you, Thomas. Can you guess?"

"What! You don't mean Uncle Joe——?"

You see I am old at the game. I have become as sensitive as a cobweb, and can detect the direction of the wind at once. I have to be wary.

"Oh, my *dear* son! No, I am thankful to say. How can you! No. Someone's going to be married. Aren't they, Nita? Can't you guess who it is, Thomas?"

Nita is my half-nephew's young widow. The relationship is too complicated to explain.

I kissed my mother thoughtfully and pondered so that I might let her down as heavily as possible. It's

the only way. Then I said suddenly:

"Ben."

Ben is the village lad of seventeen who comes on Fridays to help mow the lawn.

"Oh, surely you——"

"Sarah."

Sarah is our middle-aged parlor maid.

"My dear——"

"Bishop of London, No; Princerwales."

"Oh, you're shouting! How can you be so ridiculous, Thomas! Is it likely I should want you to guess if it was—— Nita guessed at once, didn't you, Nita?"

Nita nodded to me as she fanned away a wasp, and said in her rapid contralto tones that always remind me of someone decanting a very musical bottle of port wine:

"Not going to tell you."

"I don't want to know."

"Well then, it is your cousin Ferdinand."

"What! Poor old Ferdinand! Are they going to do it to *him* all over again?"

"What does my boy mean?" cried my mother despairingly, trying hard not to be dashed.

Then she collected herself and went on:

"I have just heard from your aunt, Thomas, telling me of Ferdinand's engagement. And quite time. Only four years younger than you! Naturally your aunt is overjoyed. Dear Elizabeth, how well I understand her feelings—I can sympathize. Now don't

forget to write and congratulate——”

“But the man’s married already,” I broke in.

“Married already!” my mother exclaimed aghast.

“You’re going off your head,” Nita put in cheerfully.

“But he was married two years ago!”

“Ferdinand was?”

“Well, *someone* was.”

“Oh, you must be thinking of John, of course,” my mother exclaimed in a tone of relief.

“Am I?”

“Considering you were dining with Ferdinand only a week or two ago you ought to know whether he is married or not,” said Nita.

“Why? Women are never allowed in the Club.”

“Of course I know that; but he would have mentioned his wife.”

“Would he? Why?”

“M—*well*.” My mother made a gesture of despair as she picked up the letters beside her plate and left the room.

“Oh, you can’t carry it off with me,” Nita ran on laughing. “It will be your turn soon. Poor old T.! No more developing photographs in the bath for him; then; no more cigarette ends thrown into the fender; no more coming down to breakfast in slippers at ten on Sunday morning; no more smoking in bed and burning holes in the blankets; no more practising golf shots against the dining-room curtains and breaking the windows, poor boy!”



"You don't know anything about it," I said. "You're completely wrong. She's going to be a dear old thing; fat, I tell you, with dimples, and a bunch of keys in a basket. She won't mind picking up matches and cigarette-ends—she will like doing things for me.

Nita laughed her characteristic peal of gurgles. It's pleasant to hear her.

"You may joke," said she; "but you've got a sharp lesson to learn, I can tell you." She laughed again and brought up with a final, "Oh dear!"

"Oh dear what?" I commented. "You know the country; then why not give me a lead? That would be the really handsome thing to do. There are any number of men who would snap you up if you gave them a chance of a snap. You shouldn't be so unkind, Nita. You're a cruel woman. You should take your pick and be thankful. There's poor Williams, for instance: what's wrong with Williams? And poor 'Poodle,' he's all right; and then there's that poor blighter who holds the plate in church; and poor old Thing-um-bob, and poor——"

I broke off because Nita tried to bonnet me with the tea-cosy.

It must not be supposed that I always carry things off as gaily as I did this morning. Nita is a great ally. She is always ready to take part in any nonsense; doesn't mind being chaffed; believes more or less everything I tell her; and can be drawn out with absolute certainty, always, just as easily as one can

draw a kitten from under a chair with the corner of one's handkerchief. She is, besides, the best-natured woman I ever came across. When she is not with us, my everlasting fencing with my mother on the matrimonial question has to be more adroit, and is wearing to a degree, so that I sometimes feel I shall break down and fling myself away on someone.

It is several weeks now since my stepmother made use of an expression which filled me with a sort of panic at the time and the consciousness of which still hangs about me as if I had just had my hair cut.

I admit I was in the wrong. I had thrown a sofa cushion at Nita and, without knowing it, must have knocked one of her gilded hairpins into the new piano. This would not have mattered but that it got astride E-flat, and made the note sound like a jew's harp, so that my mother was thrown into consternation when, in a sentimental mood, she visited the piano after dinner. It was an expert called down from London who found the hairpin, and it was I who had to explain the circumstances.

"Ah well, of course—some day. All men are the same— Till they *settle down*," my mother said finally.

"Settle down." I don't like it! There is something sinister about it! I pretend I don't understand it, but I do. It means that as a matter of course I must be married some day. But why "settled down!" If I were married I should want to throw cushions at Nita just the same. At least, I hope so. If I

did not want to, it would be because I felt dreary. I don't want to be dreary. I want always to be gay and happy. Those references to being "settled down" catch me like the east wind.

I had a touch of it only a few days after this jolt my mother gave me. I happened to get into the same carriage with Goben on my way up to town. He may be a few years older than I am; nine-and-twenty perhaps—certainly not more. I had heard he was going to be married, so I congratulated him.

"Thanks," said Goben with easy complacency as he turned his paper; "yes I've decided to settle down."

Now I appeal to the universe to tell me in what possible way Goben could "settle down"? In what way, I ask, could the droning key to which his life is tuned be made more spiritless and monotonous?

Here are the facts. Goben holds a good billet in a service which looks after him with the solicitude of a doting aunt. All his needs are provided for. They even give him a penknife. They cook for him in the basement so that he may have a chop served all hissing to his blotting-pad at one o'clock and go out to see the papers at his Club afterwards. He has a fourth share in a bottle that looks like furniture polish, but which is actually Worcester Sauce. The service protects him against most of the misfortunes and anxieties that can beset a man in this life; the success of his career is guaranteed by printed and bound tables of yearly increment; and he can calculate exactly when the men above him will retire and he will be-

come successively possessed of their rooms, salaries, ink-pots, and copper-scuttles with bits of brown paper covering holes in the bottoms. If he has a cold he wires to the Hon. Rupert Heronshaw, his chief, to tell him about it, and afterwards fills in a form, and a report is written on it and Gobon's cold is filed away among the National Records. He can have forty colds a year if he must; due importance will be given to each of them, and no one will grow weary of them; and if the recorder of colds breaks down, a successor will automatically appoint himself at a salary of £—— rising by yearly increments of £—— to £——. Gobon therefore, so far as his career is concerned, is already "settled." It would take a question asked in the House of Commons to shift him.

For the rest, Gobon's life is entirely given up to the pursuit of beetles. When "Mr. Gobon has not come back from lunch yet," he may often be seen in one of the parks making dirt pies. This means that Gobon, having collected nearly all known visible beetles, is engaged in harvesting those which cannot be seen with the naked eye. Directly he gets home Gobon sifts out the dirt under a magnifying glass until a moving particle is detected. The particle is put into the killing-bottle and examined under a microscope. If no true beetle it is cast aside with a grunt; a life has been sacrificed in vain. If a right one, it is combed with camels'-hair brushes, laid out on a scrap of mounting card, and identified in a heavy volume which gives the number of joints in the antennæ of

each known beetle. When this has been done nothing remains but for Goben to refer to the list of his own collection and find that he already possesses the specimen in question and that another life has been sacrificed to no purpose. In fact Goben's pursuit may be fairly described as "eternal." Long before his last specimens are enshrined in his boxes, the earlier ones will have been devoured by lice.

Goben is a remote, unsmiling creature, and his dull pedantry specially struck me on the day he showed me his collection and I missed the only beetle I am familiar with. I hope I know a blackbeetle when I see one. They were the fashion when I was a child, and cook told me they were "lucky," and that no house where there were plenty of blackbeetles ever took fire. She said they dearly loved a bit of music. "Go to bed Tom. Go to bed Tom. Go to bed Tom. Go to bed Tom," *ad lib*, was the song they appeared to like best. Goben, however, solemnly told me that blackbeetles are not beetles at all; as if what was good enough for me, and everybody else for that matter, was not good enough for him!

It was these facts that held me dumb when Goben told me he was going to get married in order to settle down. The only way I can fill in the idea of his settling down when he gets married is by supposing that Mrs. Goben will collect beetles too. In that way, certainly, he might feel more solid and immovable. He would know, for instance, that if he were to fall ill, beetles would not be allowed to suffer. Nevertheless,

knowing Goben as I do, it seems to me that his expectations of a bland married life, even under these conditions, is doomed to disappointment. I picture the thoughtful spectacled face of Mrs. Goben as I imagine her entering the breakfast-room where Goben, glued to his microscope, has seized the opportunity of a spare moment to refresh himself with a first morning beetle.

"You remember, Winifred, what I told you about the Daliocathyrthius Ponthadichitos when I woke you up last night."

"Certainly."

"Well, I've had another look this morning, and in the better light I find she is only a Pahchardonto Bensoniensis."

"Oh dear! Are you sure?"

"Quite. And she has lost two feathers out of her tail."

"How very annoying! That misled you, I suppose?"

"Exactly. It's the work of those blackguard red ants again, I'll be bound."

"Are you sure he is not a——"

"She."

"But——"

"—Sure she is not a hybrid?"

"Quite. Pelirson clearly states that mules are unknown among the Palichardonti."

"Yes, I know; but you are wrong, that is all I can say."

"Thank you. Have you examined his thorax, may I ask?"

"*Her* thorax—I keep on telling you it's a doe. No, not yet, I must turn her over. Give me some hot water."

"Oh, come to breakfast, the coffee's made."

"Some hot water, please. I'll take my breakfast at this table."

"No, you certainly will not. We lost a Wandopotindoceros two years ago by your eating it with your bread and butter, and the last time you had breakfast with the microscope you left jam on the object-glass. Please remember that I have to work after you. I nearly went crazy."

And so on.

These are the scenes which arise in my mind when I speculate on the married life of Goben. They do not bring me any nearer to an understanding of what Goben has in his head when he talks of "settling down," but they confirm my intention on no account to do so myself. Always to avoid settling down is at this moment my determination. Of course it is the right thing to be polite to ladies, I know that; but such politeness need not be carried so far as a proposal of marriage. That is absurd. I define marriage as "politeness carried to the point of idiocy." That's how I define marriage. Besides, it does not seem very polite to tell a girl that you have decided to settle down and would she like to do it to you—i.e. settle you down. One would have to put it the other

way and offer to do it to her. Even that would appear rude unless managed gracefully.

I had intended to end the chapter there, but since then my mother has given me another nudge about Ferdinand. I expected as much.

I was in the drawing-room looking for a volume in the bookcase near the door, when she came in through the French windows from the garden. In spite of my attention being held by my search, I noticed that she seemed to hesitate, and moved aimlessly about the room rubbing her hands together. Then she opened the door, and I thought she had gone out. The next moment, however, she spoke close to me.

"Always remember that it will be the happiest moment of my life when I see my son safely married."

"Why? What have I done now?" I asked as I turned.

But my mother had already left the room.

I have never known my mother to give tongue on this subject so clearly. For her it was almost as if she had bitten me. Her tones were solemn, in fact tragical. They struck a chill through me. I joined Nita in the garden, and we amused ourselves by teasing the swan with a crust tied to a bit of string; but I teased him with a heavy heart.



## CHAPTER II

### NITA DRESSES ME DOWN

**T**HE gloomy thoughts which filled the last chapter gave me no chance to explain that the work I am engaged upon is no less than an account of my holiday. I am snatching a holiday. I say "snatching" because I am entitled, officially, to "twenty-eight days," but by careful interpretation of the rules I find I can stretch them to more than six weeks. This is my first summer leave, and I don't know whether anyone expects me to be away so long. They will know when I don't come back. It will dawn on them slowly for a fortnight, so that they will get used to the idea by degrees. What I did was to apply for "my month's leave." This was granted, and I was left to decide whether I had meant a lunar month of twenty-eight, or a calendar month of thirty-one, days. I have decided that I meant a calendar month of thirty-one days. Then, I am not including Sundays and the Bank Holiday as part of my leave as I never work on those days. For the same reason I am only counting Saturdays as half days. The result is that

I have seven days to add to the thirty-one, and this throws another week-end into the boiling and entitles me to add another day and a half. Then, again, I applied for my leave to date from a Tuesday, and asked my chief to let me take the Monday "because I was going away for the week-end and did not want to come back to Town for the one day unless it was absolutely necessary." It was *not* absolutely necessary, and this concession gave me five extra days, for it made my holiday begin on Saturday, so that I could add a day and a half to the other end of my leave, which roped in still another week-end and gave me another extra day and a half. Forty-four days! Not a holiday to be sniffed at, I think, and all brought about by a logical application of the official rules.

My tour is to be a great success. I have promised myself that.

My leading idea is to look up my friends. It is extraordinary what a number of friends one finds one has when one sits down to make a list, although it takes a long time to think of them all; especially old friends. It was two hours before I thought of Miss Vetch, for instance. I remembered the Duke of Sarum first: I am always reminded of him when the weather changes. It will be understood that I have many more friends than those in the schedule below, but, as they do not promise to satisfy the demands which I shall make on them, their names do not appear. I would not wish to stay in every house I know. There are some houses, too, where I

might consent to pay a visit, but where I would not care to present myself suddenly with a wide-smiling expectation of being asked to stop. As it is, there are names on my list which I am uncertain about. I feel I may funk them at the pinch and they are accordingly marked as Doubtful Starters. It is unpleasant to walk beamingly into a house with the intention of being invited to stop, and then have to realize that the company has dispersed to dress for dinner and that you have got to leave. However, the worst goer on the card is a dead cert. for lunch: I will say that for my little crowd. I have added explanatory notes, because without these my list looks dreary.

*Quinn's Final Selections*

\*The Duke of Sarum. (He peppered me once.)

Lady Jane Waterbury (a sort of cousin) and  
Singe Ditto (the Yank).

Mr. and Mrs. Wallace. (Also Sam and Miss—  
"The Wallaces.")

Mrs. Connagh (and Dogs).

The Misses Nox. (i.e. the Miss Noxes. Old  
friends.)

Lady Wilson. (Aunt Elizabeth.)

Mrs. Graham (and Daughters).

The Viscount Heckfield. (A family possession.  
He and my father saved each other's lives.)

\*Admiral Sir Anthony Ridd, K.C.M.G., R.N.

Mrs. Baker Trondell. ("Paul Davenport," author

of *Mable MacMurtrie*, etc.)

Richard Piper, Esq., K.C. (Cousin Dick.)

Richard Everard Benson, Esq., J.P. ("The Benson,"  
i.e. residuum of "The Bensons," family friends.)

Mr. and Mrs. Walter Pettigen. (Cousin Walter.)

Walter Fenton, Esq. (If he rents the Wye fishing  
this year.)

Ambrose Vernon, Esq. ("Bat" Vernon.)

Admiral and Mrs. Druce. ("The Dear Druces.")

\*Miss Vetch.

Caution is necessary in accepting invitations to stay with friends. They suppose you will want to be entertained, and they do not ask you unless they have made preparations. This means that you have got to pretend you are being entertained whether you are or not. There is no hope for the morrow. You must stick it out to the very dregs. The only thing to do is to hide, and just roll up for meals.

With my faithful little car "Silent Susan," however, I can face these difficulties with a careless heart. I shall be like a bluebottle fly buzzing capriciously from one delectable spot to another. Distance will be no object, for a journey in Susan is a sheer delight, and motor travel is to afford the chief part of the pleasure I have promised myself. With Susan I can present myself suddenly to my friend like a dog rushing up for recognition. If he likes the way I do my hair; the pattern of my tweeds; the hearty freedom

\*Doubtful Starters

from reserve with which I plunge upon his luncheon-table after spoiling a towel in the lavatory (to keep Susan running is a job for a sweep)—if, in short, he does not want me to go, he will be at liberty to ask me to stay. If on my part, after sampling his table and his company, and testing how far time has affected the old reciprocity of ideas between us, I decide that I should like to stay, I can accept: but if, on the other hand, I don't like the cooking; or the middle-aged lady in the cap and spectacles; or the smell of mackintoshes pervading the outer hall; or the hushed repressed atmosphere of the house as though there were an invalid upstairs, I can decline.

You see, this is to be *my* holiday. I have not been scheming and planning to provide amusement for my friends. I am, however, going to give every host a good chance. Directly he claps eyes on Susan he will know what he has bitten off. My luggage will be abundant beyond the nightmares of a railway porter. It will comprise nearly every article of wearing apparel I possess, including my fancy costume of Sinbad the Sailor. The object of this is to give me confidence at whatever house I may approach, for I shall know that wherever I go my wardrobe will be equal to any emergency. I shall also be independent of the laundress. It will help to keep Susan well down on the road, too, and prevent her from hopping and slithering about as she is apt to do when traveling light at high speeds. Six weeks' supply of four different kinds of shirts will, alone, make a hefty lift;

my total luggage will no doubt run to several hundred-weight; and Susan will be proportionately grateful.

What I specially referred to when I said that my host will know what he has bitten off directly he sets eyes on Susan was, however, my *toys*. I am going to take all my toys with me and stow them so that they will bulge, and entrance the beholder. When my host sees my cricket bats, tennis racquets, golf clubs, banjo, fishing rods, guns, billiard cue and croquet mallet, he will know where he stands. If he cannot offer me cricket, lawn tennis, golf, croquet, shooting, fishing and billiards, or some of them, he will have to make an awkward apology. In these circumstances I can promise myself a varied holiday. Under the auspices of Susan I can be my own bonny self; I need not try to please anyone, or pretend to be amused when I am bored. That suits me. I pretend to nothing. I have no political convictions, I have no philosophical ideals; I am not anti-anything nor pro-anything else. I am merely Quinn; simply that and nothing more. When people ask me, religiously or politically, "What are you?" I always reply: "Nothing. I'm just plain Quinn." So let them leave me or take me just as I am with my luggage and my toys—take me or leave me, I shall not care. If they don't take me I will go somewhere else. One turn of the handle (or more); one rasp of the hooter; one terrific explosion through the exhaust—of which Susan alone among motor-cars knows the unfathom-

able secret—and I shall shake the dust of the front drive from off my wheels, and in forty seconds nothing will be left of me but the reverberating echoes from the distant hills, and a dense trailing cloud of suffocating blue smoke, which, under favorable atmospheric conditions, will hang about the shrubberies for an hour.

Just as I wrote these last words, somebody quietly tried the handle of the door, which I had locked. As I got no reply to my inquiry, I went and opened it. No one was there, but on the floor I found a small parcel tied in brown paper. It was not addressed to me, but the following words were written upon the wrapper in my mother's handwriting:

"I feel sure my son will like to read this, in spare moments, on his tour."

I cut the string with a sinking of heart which was only too well justified. It was a book about it. My mother had planted it and fled.

### "MARRIAGE

An examination into the fundamental principles underlying the reciprocity, spiritual as well as temporal, which essentially constitutes the prescience of the Dual State

by

*Montague James Erasmus Tabb, M.A. (Oxon)*

Canon of Tanbury, late Rector of Pridd,

and formerly curate in charge of Pinbottle Lane Chapel of Ease, Whitton; Hon. Chaplain to St. Waldorf's College for Women; Author of "Conscience Awakened," Breakfast Table Homilies," etc., and Joint Editor of Tidd's Biblical Almanac

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

The Right Reverend (*Ha!*) Frederick Barton Blims, D.D., Lord Bishop of Tanbury."

I must read this. This will nourish me. Nutrient on the marriage question is perhaps exactly what I want.

### INTRODUCTION

By (*Bishop as before*)

"This book, which has been written by a Canon of mine——"

On second thoughts I will read what his Canon has got to say first.

### Chapter I

"Scarcely three thousand years have come and gone, if we may venture to trust, and I think we may, the observation of those learned men, the sages of our modern years, whose beards have verily gone gray in their deep ponderings and meditations over the Cufic inscrip-



tions bitten into the adamantine living granite of Asia Minor—scarcely three thousand years have come and gone, sweeping before them——”

Can't read it. I am out of breath already. I'll skip a page.

“. . . those strenuous pleadings, those rhapsodies of petitioning, those clamorous yearnings, those——”

Wow—Wow—Wow—Wow. Tabb is an ass. I'll take a sample from Chapter VII.

“. . . and so we see that sorrow, that bitter herb which, growing among the weeds of human folly, cures where it pains; sorrow which guides us in the path of self-immolation, this sorrow is at once the impulse of the marriage bower, and the rock to which they twain must cling to lift them above the strife, and the turmoil, and the vanity, and——”

The joint editor of Tidds' Biblical Almanac is a howling prig. I cannot read his book. There is something wrong with the man. I have glanced through his pages, and the conclusion I come to is that Tabb is mentally crippled. According to Tabb a pretty girl is too indelicate a thing to be mentioned. Tabb seems to consider that no one can be ideally wedded unless he is miserable, and afflicted with bad

health or depressed by some like misfortune. His book affects me like the mewling of a cat.

Later in the day I had a quite astonishing talk with Nita. She is really a most extraordinary woman. I found her sitting in the drawing-room in her garden hat fiddling about with some of that lace embroidery she is so clever at. I mentioned that my mother had dumped the book.

"Yes; she told me of it," said Nita, busy with her needle.

"Why did she do it?"

"Thought you wanted stiffening up, old man, perhaps," Nita laughed.

"It's the most awful blather I ever read."

"Oh well, it's quite short."

"Short! You talk as if it were a punishment. Have you read it?"

"Of course not. I don't read such books."

"I don't either."

"Well; time enough. There is no chance of your being married for many a long day."

"You mean I don't intend to be."

Nita laughed. "You do amuse me so," she said.

"Well, what do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean that no really nice girl would look at you."

Nita glanced up. She seemed almost serious.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Oh, there's plenty wrong," said Nita, laughing again. "You are a great deal too pleased with yourself for one thing."

"I don't understand you," I said.

"You mock at everything. You have no respect, no reverence. Women like self-depreciation and modesty in a man."

"I believe you're trying to pull my leg. Who said I was immodest?"

"You know what I mean well enough. You are arrogant; you are impatient of other people's opinions——"

"That's not arrogance—if people talk rubbish——"

"Conceited then."

"Oh come! You can't say I'm conceited. You never caught *me* riding the high horse."

"You ridicule other people's ideas."

"Well, it amuses me. I like it."

"Exactly. You are selfish."

"Nita! Selfish! ME!!"

"My dear boy, you are quite the most selfish man I ever met. I don't believe you ever think of anyone but yourself from the moment you get up in the morning till you go to bed."

"But I think of others when I am in bed—and dream of them all night long."

"You can't joke it off. You're very selfish. You are even greedy."

"Oh come, Nita, that's beyond a joke."

"Well, but aren't you? Why did you snap up all the savories at supper on Sunday night, for instance?"

"Good gracious—do you mean—I never thought—I mean I thought you—well, anyhow, my mother never takes them."

"There you are, you see." Nita waved a hand.

"Look here," I said, "why are you rattling me like this, Nita?"

"You asked me to tell you why there is no chance of your being married yet. You can't change yourself all at once. Girls will not trouble about a man who is self-centered, arrogant, and scornful. They expect modesty, and a certain amount of reserve, and consideration for others, and deference to their opinions, and respect, and veneration——"

"You've been reading Tabb."

"Oh no, I haven't."

"Well, then, I can tell you this: I don't care a fig about girls who esteem modesty, and humility, and deference, and veneration, and benignity, and self-effacement, and snivelling, and carpet-scraping. They bore me to death. Not one of them knows how to dress, or how to do her hair becomingly, or how to look pretty and charming. What's the good of a girl without charm?"

Nita laughed merrily. "There you go!" she cried. "They bore you! Thomas is bored! That's enough! Cast them aside, sweep them out of the way, give Thomas more room! It does not, of course, matter whether Thomas bores *them*."

"He doesn't care if he does—they deserve to be bored. But I know you are chaffing. You cannot

make out that I bore people, Nita. Now, can you?"

"There are other ways of boring people besides being polite and decorous. For instance, why do you always insist on saying what you want to say, instead of what other people want to hear?"

"Well, I can't be forty different people. I don't pretend to be anything but just plain Quinn. You know that, Nita."

"I know it well; but the things plain Quinn says are appalling."

"Now what do you mean by that? Do explain."

"I mean that you are the rudest man I ever met."

"Oh, bosh! When was I rude? I wish you would look up; I can't see you under your hat."

"Well, for instance, yesterday afternoon when Mrs. Yates was here, you told her that her horse looked as if his dam had been frightened by a hippopotamus."

"But that wasn't rude! It was the truth. Besides, Mrs. Yates admitted he was fat."

"Not rude! Good gracious! You never hear Aunt Emmy say a thing like that."

"It was only a joke."

"I daresay it amused you; it was not your gee."

"Well—can you give me another instance?"

"You told Mrs. Yates she would know what Rachel Graham looked like if she imagined Maud and Valerie shaken up together in a bottle."

"Well! She asked how Rachel was growing up, and I told her exactly. We are all friends. Give me another sample, I don't count that one."

"No, I won't. You will repeat them, and you ought to forget them. You should be more circumspect."

"Well, it's no good finding fault with me. That's no help. You've called me nearly every bad name you can think of. Tell me your idea of how I ought to behave."

Nita put down her work and got up. "I'll give you a book," she said, and she hurried out of the room.

I half fancied Nita was pulling my leg all the time. We are perfectly good friends always, in fact, we are, in a sense, quite pals. She could not really have meant that she thinks I am conceited, and selfish, and greedy, and generally beastly. I was not able to see her face properly, yet she seemed serious. I must have upset her in some way. She came running downstairs a minute later and I heard her jump the last steps, so I knew there was nothing seriously amiss.

"There!" she said a little breathlessly.

"Why, when did you get hold of this?"

"I found it."

"Where?"

"In the pocket of my dress box. Someone's servant must have thought it was mine and packed it."

"'Social Deportment,'" I read, "'By a member of the British Aristocracy.'" I turned the leaves of

the dingy old book. "What to say to a lady who has dropped her fan."

"Dear Lady.'—He calls her 'Dear Lady.' 'Dear Lady, to stoop before you is my proudest privilege.'

"Now, can you imagine my saying a thing like that, Nita?"

"No I can't," said Nita. "That is why I say you will never please women. You are incapable of sentiment."

"Now it's 'Sentiment'! Do put down that work and attend. This is serious, and I believe you're laughing."

"I can't help being amused. You seem to think you know more than people who write books."

"Well, I confess I don't understand. Do explain what the idea is. Take the book and teach me. I'll look over you, and we will do it together. Here you are—'Talk at the Dinner Table.' You be Mrs. F. and I will be Mr. D."

Nita began to read:

"Mrs. F. might say: 'Was not the Royal Academy Exhibition truly delightful? I think Millais' pictures are too utterly sweet, and so intensely sincere.'"

"To which Mr. D. might reply," I read: "'I entirely agree with you, they are most sincere. Sir John is a charming disciple of the brush, but to my mind Sir Frederick is a more sensitive and fastidious votary of the palette.'—Lummy! I can't read this. Let's try something else," I broke off. "Here you are—'Sporting Prattle.' You begin again."

Nita read: "I am so devoted to dogs. Do you not agree with me that they are a fascinating study?"

"The dog is, indeed, a delightful animal," I read, "and wonderfully faithful; but to my mind the horse is to be preferred."

"Quite true; he is a noble beast."

"If you talk like that, Nita," I said, "I'll never speak to you again."

"You must follow the book," said Nita. "Go on: 'Mr. D. might reply.'"

"'Might reply'—take your finger away—'reply: 'Yes, he is a noble beast indeed. I always call the horse the friend of man.'—Why are you shivering, are you cold?'"

"Nothing to matter. That's all right, but don't talk as if you had a plum in your mouth."

"I can't do it. I don't want to live in such a world. Let's try somewhere else. Here you are: 'Airy Nothings for the Ballroom.' Let's rehearse some airy nothings. I begin this time." I read:

"I envy that butterfly perched so daintily on your hair close to that shell-like ear. What secrets would I not whisper were I so near. Happy butterfly! Now you reply."

"'Unlike' you, my butterfly has no feeling, so it does not appreciate its happiness, which is, I believe, characteristic of butterflies—you ought to know something about it."

"Oh, Nita, you minx!"



"Go on and finish."

"'You are kind enough to anticipate my feelings,'"  
I read. "'I have not found my wings as yet. I  
am still in a chrysalis state.'"

"That's better," Nita told me, "but you are too  
heavy. You don't put any warmth into your voice.  
You should be more ardent."

"All right. Let me try again. I shall do it this  
time. I'll begin at the beginning—'I envy that butter-  
fly perched so——'"

"Oh! oh! you're tickling my ear."

"That's the 'airy' part of the 'nothing.' Don't  
laugh, I am just going to be ardent—do sit still."

But Nita would not sit still, and went on laughing,  
and finally she jumped up and dodged round the  
tables till my mother, who had come into the room,  
cried to her to "take care of the vases." Then she  
slipped out of the window.

My mother drifted nervously about the room,  
rubbing her hands together as she always does when  
she is preparing to make one of her springs at me.  
Then she confronted me and whispered:

"Did you get——?" and stopped.

I nodded my head at her. Far away in the garden  
I could see Nita swaying about in a paroxysm of  
laughter.

"Give me a kiss, my son," said my mother; and  
then she added, as I bent to her, "Such a devout  
man."

Oh dear! oh *dear!* oh dear! I can only console

myself with the thought that Susan is greased up to a point beyond belief and that I have repacked the gland of the pump spindle so that water cannot drain from the radiator into the crank chamber any more—at least I hope not. The day after tomorrow I shall be off.

## CHAPTER III

### MY ABORTIVE ATTEMPT ON THE POET BENSON

**I** AM off. I have had a glorious day of crowded life, and I am now at the Lamb Hotel, Fradford. "Bat" Vernon is in the bar "keeping out the damp," as he calls it, and trying to embarrass a very well-matured barmaid. I am sitting in the parlor, and as the result of an arduous day, topped off with an honest British feed, my condition is one of holy calm. I should, by rights, be at Cradhill Court, testing the table and bed-linen of The Benson, but there has been a hitch.

I must explain that two days ago I had a letter from "Bat," asking me to join him for a week-end's fishing at Fradford. That suited me, for my tour allows me to do just what I like from moment to moment. I told Bat I would pick him up at Reading, and that we would go on together by road. In order that there might be no chance of our missing one another, I was careful to be exact. "*If I am not on the platform when your train pulls up,*" I underlined, "*you will find me outside waiting in the car.*"

As a result of the greasing I had given her, Susan's action this morning was sublime. She started off with a thick, suety note which was a pure delight to hear. I drove her gently and revelled in it, and began to deprecate the extravagance of six-cylinder and patent "silent" cars. I felt Bat would be impressed. He has an uncomfortable way of making light of Susan. When, however, the good tough grease began to melt and run, and the sun got to work on her body, all the well-known chirrup came to life one after the other, and the old girl rattled along in her usual one-cylinder style.

My road lay through Rickmansworth, Maidenhead, and Henley. I choose by-roads. They fit the holiday humor. The drawback to this method of travel is, however, that one is apt to lose one's way, and I made an ass of myself this morning in consequence—or, rather, an unknown motorist made an ass of himself. No one, of course, knew it was I. The fact is, poor little Susan does not, I am afraid, accelerate very well unless she is on a down grade, so that one never lets her stop, when once she is fairly on the move, if it can possibly be avoided. When there is doubt about the road, all that is necessary is to slow Susan down to about fifteen miles an hour and shout the name of the place wanted at a passer-by with the voice raised in a strong note of inquiry. If the passer-by has ordinary intelligence he can easily yell an answer before Susan is out of range. I could not today, however, get replies from anyone,

when I wanted to know whether I was on the right track.

First it was a pedlar.

"Maidstone?" I bellowed. He stared like a stunned sheep.

"Idiot!"

Then a laborer.

"Maidstone?"—"Idiot!"

It should be explained that "Maidstone?" is shouted as Susan approaches the stranger, "Idiot!" as she recedes.

"Maidstone?"—"Idiot!" This time it was a man pushing a perambulator with a sack in it.

Once more: "Maidstone?"—"Idiot!"

I began to get annoyed—the place was close at hand, I knew. A white-haired, keen-faced clergyman, with leggings and a stout stick in his hand, came out of a roadside cottage a little way ahead. The old man stood right up into the hedge, smiling, to let me pass. I stopped.

"Can you tell me whether I am right for Maidstone?"

"I am a little deaf."

*"Maidstone."*

"No. I am sorry. I am sorry."

"Not a soul can tell me," I complained. "The place cannot be much more than ten miles away, and no one in all this county knows how to get there."

"Ten miles! Are you quite sure you don't mean Maidenhead?"

"Of course I mean it. Why, what did I say?"

"You said Maidstone."

It is extraordinary how dull-witted country folk are. Not one of all those persons guessed that when I said "Maidstone" I meant Maidenhead, although they were only a few miles from the place.

After we had passed Henley we took a wrong road, and, in the act of turning, Susan went up on to the path and stopped an argument between two men. The suspicion flashed upon me that Susan was not behaving, and this was confirmed when she bumped into Reading Station and knocked a bit of brick out of the buttress by the cabstand, with the winding end of her crank shaft. It was a heavy blow and I trembled for Susan, but she seems to be all the better for it. It has tightened her up somewhere, apparently. An examination showed that she had slobbered herself with grease from end to end, and that it had involved her brakes.

While I was still on my back putting things to rights, a pair of white linen spats wandered into my restricted field of view, and I realized that Bat's train had arrived and that, not finding me on the platform, he was following instructions and looking for me in the car.

Bat got his name at school, possibly from the whimsical, peering expression in his eyes. He is a man who can scarcely tie a knot, and who always tries to unscrew a thing by tightening it up. This makes him worse than useless when anything goes wrong

with Susan, for he not only stands aside and looks on with an air of indulgent amusement, but affects to see a humorous side to incidents which are not in the least funny. As usual, he was exquisitely clothed; carried a light overcoat and walking stick with gold match-box in the handle; and was attended by a porter with his fishing-gear and a crocodile-hide suitcase with silvered mountings. It was annoying having to wriggle out, hot and dusty, and greet him with hands and arms smeared with black grease, and a tickle on my nose.

"Oh!" he said in a tone of enlightenment as I rose into view on the opposite side of Susan and desperately rubbed my nose on the spare tire.

"—Oh! I see; *under*, not *in*, the car."

He stored his things away, and then, as I lay down in the road again, said he thought he would "just go and keep out the damp a bit."

"But," he continued, "I want you to understand how it was I kept you waiting. In your letter you distinctly said you would be *in* the car. You never told me I was to look *under* the car. So that's how it was. I only just want to be sure you understand about it." Then he moved off towards the refreshment-room.

When at length we started I noticed a dull reluctance in Susan's progress down the slope to the Caversham road, and I was soon made aware of a deadly struggle that was going on between Susan and her brakes. Bat complained that Susan was

being too cautious. The position was critical. The question was would the one cylinder be able to overcome the brakes, or would the brakes prove too much for the cylinder? No one could possibly say. Susan had got to fight it out and decide for herself. In spite of Bat's protest that we had only just started and that it was too soon to go back, I turned Susan round, after she had staggered up the slope of Caversham Bridge on the second gear, and decided to travel by the more level road through Pangbourne. Gradually, to my joy, the cylinder began to get the advantage of the brakes. The road-grit, working up with the grease, made a first-rate grinding mixture which ground down the bands and brake-drums at every turn. Then as the metal got hot the grease ran freely and released the bands which had a tendency to bind, and at last little Susan, with her back hubs all a-fry and her radiator boiling with the sternness of the struggle, began to forge ahead into a gentle trot. It was all most praiseworthy. Another car might have kept up tinkering by the roadside for hours. Not so Susan. The white plume spouting from the radiator looked quite impressive. "Steam was up at last," as Bat said. There was a good deal of smoke too, but, as I explained to Bat, it was only the oil frying on the brakes. There was no chance of the fishing-rods catching fire, althought they were "only wood," as he put it.

"Talking of frying," he said, "reminds me. Have you ordered dinner?"



I told him my plans. The Benson lived only three miles above Fradford, where he had a choice bit of water that was rarely fished. The hotel water at Fradford was, however, getting very tired indeed. Nearly everything that could be caught had been taken out of it, and most of the good fish remaining were known by name. Sammy was a trout to be always remembered when once seen, and Fred was known by reputation far and wide. He still wore a rusty hook in the side of his head that he got two seasons ago. The most famous of all was, however, Edward. Scores of anglers had been trying to catch Edward for years. The "Eddy Sweep" had become historic in fishing circles. A party of visitors at the "Lamb" had once paid a shilling each into a pool which was to be scooped by the first of them who caught Edward by fair fly-fishing. He was not caught then, and he is still not caught. You pay your shilling and you take your chance of Edward and a prize which is said to be now worth more than twenty pounds. The water, as I told Bat, was quite used up. I proposed, therefore, to tap The Benson for a week-end visit, and bring Bat over. We could not very well drive up on a Sunday morning.

Bat thought it a good idea, and at once filled in what he regarded as the most important details. I was to provide the sandwiches, as those supplied by the hotel would be very dull, and he would bring something to keep out the damp. "I feel sorry, already, for those trout," he concluded.

Bat is not an expert fly-fisher. He has all the cheerfulness and imperturbability that go to make one, but he has not the aptitude. He has a genius for catching fish in all sorts of unheard-of ways. He hooked a trout by the tail. He took a frog on a may-fly. He caught a heavy grayling, which an hour before had broken me, by getting his hook foul of my cast which the fish was trailing about. He had allowed his line to lie out on the water and sink while he filled his pipe. and I can hear now his joyous shouts, when, on taking up his rod, he found, as he thought, that he had hooked a fish by such idle methods. I secretly observe him sometimes, when sport is slow, allowing his line to sink unheeded, evidently in the hope that the miracle may happen again.

Bat has, however, fallen from the high ambition of his initiation, when he struck at a small rising trout, hooked it under the belly, and whipped it up thirty feet into the top of an ash tree. He has formed a taste for bottom fishing. He does not call it "fishing," however. His name for the sport is "drowning worms."

"I drowned some worms three weeks ago near Weltham on the Broads," he told me as we bustled along. "I hired a boat and a rod after breakfast from the hotel, where I was putting in a short alcoholic rest, and rowed down the river looking for a likely spot. I went a long way without seeming to smell any fish, and then I came to a sort of inlet.

I pushed through some rushes and found a capital bit of water, with a rustic summer-house at the far end under some trees, so I tied up and began to fish. It was all right, I tell you. I caught fish, one after another. How big? Oh! I don't know how big. One or two pounds, I should say—four or five perhaps; not so big as salmon, but nice, fat fish. No, I don't know what sort of fish. They were simply fish—you know what a fish is like? It is wet and has a tail and dances about—well, mine were like that. I tell you the boat was beginning to sink—well, anyhow, it looked as if it would. It's a fact. I even began to be afraid there would not be enough worms to go round. Then a boy came to the far bank of the river and began shouting something about 'Mr. Cook' and the 'time.' I was too busy to pay much attention, but after five minutes it dawned upon me that I was catching 'time' fish belonging to Mr. Cook: but I tell you what! Tame fish are the right sort to go after. Don't forget that! What one wants is fish that are nice and tame and lots of them—the tamer the better. No fish is too tame for me."

By half-past four we were at the Lamb Hotel, Fradford, and three minutes later Bat's luggage had been carried off, and he himself was interviewing the lady with the fair hair and earrings, who lives in the glass retort at the foot of the stairs, and asking searching questions about his bed. How big was it? What was the mattress stuffed with? Would it bear

his weight? Could she guess what his weight was? etc. The quality of being able to behave in this way without offensiveness or loss of dignity, and the more remarkable quality of finding unending amusement in it, are quite special to Bat.

Meanwhile I started off in Susan on my visit to The Benson so that I might not miss the auspicious occasion of his tea-table.

I call Richard Everard Benson, Esquire, J.P., "The Benson" because the term is precise and grammatical. In my boyhood The Bensons were a large family. Since then, daughters have married, sons have left home. The head of the family now lives alone at Cradhall Court, and when I go there, I go definitely to see The Benson, i.e. the solitary, final residuum of The Bensons.

The Benson has spent his life aching. He always seems to have a grievance too deep for words and too well understood to need explanation. Yet my mother exclaimed, "What do you mean, my son?" when a little time ago I mentioned that "The Benson was aching up in Town."

What I referred to is the fact that The Benson spends his waking hours with one eyebrow raised and the other depressed to the extreme limits of muscular contraction. If you catch him dozing you will see that his forehead has taken a permanent set from loss of elasticity of the membrane arising from this habit of nursing a grievance. The Benson aches through meals. He aches as he reads. He aches at

a joke. This is not the result of troubles or anxieties or of ill-health. It is a pose. If anyone asked me when he first began to ache I should find out when he first wrote poetry and fix the date at that.

The first thing a man usually does when he is led to try his hand at verse-making is to discover that he is a poet. I am a poet; but I am redeemed by not being an ass as well. The Benson is not so redeemed. Astounded by the amazing revelation, he laid himself out to be a poet on the large plan. The writing of poetry was a secondary matter. Many poets, he knew, did not publish a line for years together. The great thing was to *be* a poet, and The Benson's aspirations are still proclaimed by his dress.

His first difficulty was, of course, that one cannot begin to be a poet until other people have accepted the fact. Otherwise they say: "What's wrong?" "Buck up, lad!" "Why so moldy?" etc. etc., while all the time you are merely trying to be a poet. On the other hand, if they know you are a poet, they regard your demeanor with respect. The Benson's own family, of course, knew he was a bit of a poet, but a man cannot impress his own belongings. Literary glamor is a fragile thing. For my part, by the time I have seen a man eat a poached egg I have no desire to read anything he has written.

I can entirely enter into The Benson's feelings and sympathize with him. Knowing that he was a poet

he would be well aware that he necessarily felt things more deeply; was more subtly appreciative of the appeals of nature; more sensitive to the changing phases of the soul; more awake to the consciousness of the finer essence and spirit of life and of the universe, and all that sort of rot, than other people. Such self-approbation is no easy load for a man to carry; and when it is remembered that the precious burden has not only to be borne in secret but is liable to come into collision with the attributes of common minds, it will be realized that the job a poet tackles is not a job to be sniffed at by any manner of means.

The Benson, conscious that, as a poet, life held for him refinements of delight which were denied to the common herd, would get up in the dark to play the fool with a sunrise. He would pace the garden in full view of the house, gathering sweetness from the reflection that the dawn was breaking upon him and that the great poet would soon glow in the "ruddy, effulgent beams of the sun." He would ponder the spiritual grandeur of his employment and fondle the idea that it linked him with the very salt of the earth. He would build up sublime thoughts around the humblest objects; smile raptly, with nodding head, at the silver trail of a slug across the gravel; and dote on the flash of genius which presented to his mind "dye me" as a rhyme to "slimy." He would feel that a poet thus employed ought not to hear the gong, and that he ought to start

violently when he was called to go to breakfast.

All this no doubt was exhilarating, but in order to get other people to agree that he is a poet a man must actually publish a poem or two. This is not so easy as might be supposed. Certainly he may submit a poem to any editor he chooses, but will that editor keep it? That is the point. The Benson probably found that editors sometimes did keep his poems, but that this only happened when they had not been accompanied with a "stamped and addressed envelope, a stamped and addressed cover, or a stamped and addressed wrapper." The Benson is not the man to grudge the editor a stamp; he would certainly make no demur about throwing in an envelope; but he might well shrink from presenting the envelope already stamped and addressed. It would make it so perilously easy for the editor to return his poem; whereas if that editor knew he had to stick on the stamp and address the envelope he might think twice about rejecting Benson's heart-throb.

It may have been such experiences as these which galled The Benson to publish in volume form. To do this he had to find a publisher whose reputation was already wrecked and pay him for the job of printing and distributing (a) *Haec aut Nulla*, (b) *The Sublime Intensity*, and (c) *The Carrion Crowd*. The two first were published simultaneously, and this gives color to my belief that, when he went to the publishers, our author was at the point of bursting with suppressed poeticality. *The Carrion Crowd* ap-

peared rather more than a year afterwards, and is no less than a sporting attempt on the part of The Benson (Ref. Life of Lord Byron) to square accounts with a public that ignored his books, and with critics who gave it first-class reasons for doing so. He considers that the wit latent in the title should alone have made the work famous, as by altering one letter only it becomes *Carrión Crows*. I pointed out to him that in this title, which compares his readers to vultures, he entirely gives himself away by suggesting that his verses are putrid, a harder word than any which has yet been applied to them.

"Oh dear no!" said The Benson. "That's not at all the way to look at it."

Well well! The publishers printed his books, but the question of distribution remained a problem. With a fly-blown copy of *Haec* open at page 43 ("Dear Thames, I love, love, love you") bleaching in the window of the Fradford newsagent, where in November I have seen it competing for public favor with cheap fireworks; and with many cubic yards of stock cumbering the cellars of his publishers, The Benson bethought him of his friends' birthdays to the extent of three consecutive birthdays to each friend as follows: first birthday, *Haec aut Nulla*; second birthday, *The Sublime Intensity*; third birthday, *The Carrión Crowd*. It was immediately after the third birthday that philanthropy was made to serve its turn and give our poet a further hoist.

I came down to breakfast one morning and found



a postal packet by my plate. I cut the string with interest.

"Why," I exclaimed, "it's that brute *Haec* on the job again."

Such indeed was the fact. Folded into the title-page was a printed slip stating that the profits from the sale of the book would be paid to the "Decayed Gentlewomen's Relief Society," and that "Three and tenpence should be sent to Richard Everard Benson, Esquire, J.P." It was a shrewd stroke, I admit. I do not know what tonnage of volumes The Benson got rid of by this device but I observed that he has now hit upon another method of planting out his verses, which, to do him justice, is most ingenious. He brings out anthologies and smuggles some of his own poems in with the rest. He grows in boldness. He lately sent me a publisher's notice of *Selected Sonnets by Shakespeare, Herrick, and Benson*.

The lodge-keeper at Cradhall Court told me that her master was at home, but that there were not any visitors! Susan went sedately along the magnificent avenue of beeches which leads to the house. We passed the turning to the stables and opened up the gardens, and I saw The Benson sitting under a tree some distance away, aching all over. As Susan ran "free" and silent round the sweep of the drive, a little table-fed dog I well remembered, with wisps of white hair on a pink skin, barked at me like a sheep coughing two fields away. That bark settled it. It brought overwhelmingly upon me all the de-

pressing associations of The Benson, pure and undiluted, in the empty house. I funk'd it. Susan roared as I wildly jammed in the gears and opened the throttle, and as she swept round past the front door I saw The Benson start to his feet and stand amazed. We rushed on; completed the loop; and hurtled with passionate eagerness down the drive, back to the "Lamb" and to Bat. The lodge-keeper, who was talking to a friend in the road as we clanged into view, ran and opened the gate as though to save it from being smashed, and we raged forth upon the road to Fradford.

So here I am.

Just as I finished writing the above Bat strolled in, having used up the barmaid for the time being and decided to give her a rest. He announced that he was going in for the "Eddy Sweep."

"It's perfectly useless," I told him. "The best of the fishing is over now. You will only disappoint yourself, and you're going back on Monday morning. You had much better fish the Legewater with me. There will be a little color in it, and it holds plenty of nice fish."

"I'm going to leave another hook or two in Edward," Bat persisted, "or I shall be able to tell you why not. I was talking to a chap in the bar just now, and he said Edward weighed at least seven pounds. He is always in the same hole, and they have put a fence round him to keep off poachers.

He told me Ben is missing. He has not been seen since early in the season. He said the fish they called Sammy was caught this year by a schoolboy who had been brought down by his father. The wretched father handed the rod to his son to hold for a moment and the boy played about with it and caught Sammy at once. He had, just before, seen him and thrown a stone at him. I tell you what it is," Bat ended, "you fellows know a lot, but the fish know all you know. The boy got Sammy off his guard because he was fishing wrong. If he had been fishing the right way, Sammy would be Sammy still. That's how I look at it. He weighed four pounds eleven and a half ounces exactly, Sammy did. I'll tell you what Edward weighs, exactly, before you get into bed tomorrow night."

After a pause and a short cough he went on:

"Look here, I've got an explanation to make," and he paused again.

"Well?" I asked.

"Why, you know that time—when I thought I had mistaken the day, I mean."

I shook my head.

"Oh, yes, you do—you can't have forgotten—you know—that time when I couldn't find you."

I had no idea what he was talking about. He went on:

"Well, I've looked up your letter and you distinctly said you would be waiting *in* the car. So that's how it was—No! look out, you'll upset this

stuff—I only just want to explain how it was I couldn't find you. If you had told me you would be *under* the car—No! All right; but what I am going to say now, is serious. I'll tell you what it is. I'm going to have a bit more of that cheese before I go to bed: you see if I don't. It will go splendidly with this cherry brandy. It's not every day one meets a cheese like that, remember. You'd better have some, too."

The table was laid, and while Bat, the embodiment of radiant content and good humor, was eating his cheese, he told me he once possessed a very fine Blue Vinney which every one but himself found rather too strong. It was kept in a particular cellar with the door shut when not in use. At that time the house was being painted, and when the account was sent in, there was an item of "extra for dirty-money to men painting in cellar." Bat explains that "dirty-money" is recompense claimed by a workman when he does work of a disgusting character which he could not be expected to undertake.

When Bat went to get his candle, I cut a slice from the cheese, put it into an envelope, followed him upstairs to his room, and hid it under his pillow.

"Happy dreams, old lad," I said as I left him.

## CHAPTER IV

### BAT VERNON AND HIS "BLUE WAGTAIL"

**W**HEN Boots woke me in the morning by chinking the jug of shaving-water against the wash-basin, I felt full of beans. Curly white clouds, gliding from the southwest across a blue rain-washed sky, promised good fishing. All was well.

I hailed Bat to his bath after leaving mine. His room called dimly to mind a grocer's shop. I lifted the blankets, put his boots in bed with him, covered him up again and left him.

Walking through the archway, which led under the house from the yard, into the cool sunlit street, my eye fell on bottles of stuffed olives displayed in the window of a shop. They reminded me of Nita, and I determined to send her a bottle as a peace-offering. Then I thought better of it. She had no business to tell me I was greedy. But I thought I might perhaps as well send her one after all, just to show I did not mind—for, of course, I don't care what she says: it's all her nonsense. After that it seemed to me I was making too much of it all, and

that it would look sentimental. It is true Nita said I ought to be more sentimental than I am. On the whole, I have decided to send her a bottle—tomorrow. Just a small one.

I strolled back to the inn yard, and found an ostler washing down Susan. A few words about Susan will not be amiss.

She was not my first. Bill the Buzzer gave me serious employment for part of two seasons before Susan came on the scene. He was a six-horsepower motor-bicycle with side-car and a patent two-speed gear in his back hub. [This matter is somewhat technical, and the uninformed reader should skip to the next paragraph.] Four and a quarter of Bill's six horse was taken up in driving his patent gears round, and what was left over was not enough for his requirements as a motor-bicycle with side-car and two passengers. Bill's back hub was an air-cooled back hub; the spokes acted as radiators and prevented the gears from getting too hot. It took from five to seven miles, traveling at fair speed, to bring the hub to a blue heat and make it smoke. This was due to the bearings, which fed their balls out one or two at a time into the hub and, accordingly, the chief work done by the engine was the grinding up of chilled steel and oil into a firm paste having the appearance of plumbago but no commercial value. Bill's limit of speed at any particular time varied, therefore, with the size and number of balls he might at the moment be engaged in digesting. Bill the

Buzzer would travel about fifteen hundred miles before his ball bearings were assimilated and it became necessary to give him a new back wheel and start him off afresh.

The reasons which decided me to part with the Buzzer were, in the main, surgical. They were prompted by repeated gun-shots in the leg, caused by the patent sparking-plug continually blowing out and shooting me in the old wound. They were, however, partly dictated by the exigencies of social expediency, as it does not do when invited out to dinner to arrive forty minutes late with your coat-tails torn off. Mine got wound up in the back wheel. Accordingly I disposed of Bill the Buzzer, and, in so doing, I am very sorry to say, also disposed of an International Rugby footballer. My successor did not treat all Bill's patents with due respect, with the result that one day the gears seized up and the pedals, suddenly whirling round like the propellers of an aeroplane, stripped the calves off his legs before he could say "What ho!"

When I first decided to get a car I went to the Motor Show to see what was to be had. My method of selection was defective, I admit. It had the merit of simplicity, but I am now aware that it did not go far enough. My system was to test the cushions. I would pick out one or two cars which specially attracted me by their shape and color; get into one; rub myself well into the seat; and then, without any loss of time, skip off to the next and rub myself

into the seat of that so as to compare sensations while they were yet vivid. I would repeat this until I could recognize each by touch, so to speak, and thus gauge their respective merits to a nicety.

It was while I was occupied with my tests and was in the act of running across on tiptoe to a bottle-blue "Rover" with my every faculty strained to hold the sensations that instant derived from the crimson seat of a green "Wolseley," that I cannoned into Williams. He is a neighbor of ours, and the first of the daily duties I set myself is to avoid getting into the same carriage with him on the journey up to town. He is a loud, commonplace man, with his mouth entirely hidden with a moustache that serves as soup-strainer and respirator. What employs him is not known, but I always imagine he is some sort of auctioneer.

Williams greeted me with a roar of recognition and shook hands warmly. It was as if we had met in Bagdad. It was useless to disguise the fact that I was contemplating the purchase of a car. Had I known it, my only defence was to insist on selling a car to Williams. As it was, I was his natural prey. He enfolded me. I thought I had escaped when I finally told him I had no intention of buying a new car. At parting, however, he said that on second thoughts he felt sure that I was wise to go in for a second-hand car if I could find just what I wanted.

The next scene was played on our front drive when one evening Williams arrived with Susan.



Williams had found just what I wanted, for me. For persuasiveness he relied chiefly on noise. His voice made me feel ashamed for the garden. He showed off Susan's paces in a fury of enthusiasm. He answered all my objections; he raised objections himself and answered them; and he answered imaginary objections that might conceivably, be raised by others. His ardor, and disinterested conviction, overwhelmed me. In order not to dash him too much, I said: "She seems just the sort of car I want."

A little time after it dawned upon me that Williams had understood me to say I would buy Susan. That was why he nodded to the man who brought the car and who thereupon went off. That was why he wiped the lining of his hat with his handkerchief. That was why he said he was very glad he came, asked if he should just run Susan into the coach-house for me, and told me I had better make the cheque payable to him, as he would have to post a cheque that night. Thus it was that I became the owner of Susan, almost unbeknown.

But I never allow anyone to say a word against Susan. Even Bat admits that she "gets there." It took a little time to find out exactly what parts needed renewing, and which only repair, but since then Susan has been the delight of my heart. It adds pleasure to one's traveling to know that the excellent performance of one's car relies upon the application of a navy's leather garter to the joint of a circulating pipe; and to be aware, when the engine

fails in a particular way, that nothing is wanted but a new paper-fastener on the commutator lever. I once ran Susan sixty miles on a hairpin begged from a lady on a bicycle; and most of Susan's ills can be cured with a bootlace or an old nail. If you showed a bit of wire off a soda-water bottle to a Rolls Royce the thing would hoot at you. Susan, on the other hand, would be grateful for it, and that is why I dote on her so much.

Speaking of hooting, reminds me that Susan's hooter is the most up-to-date thing about her. You simply pull a wire and it makes a noise like a rhinoceros coughing. It is designed to lift children and dogs from Susan's path. It will also *partly* lift invalid old ladies out of Bath-chairs, and it once made an architect fall off a ladder. Last year it put Bat out of temper for nearly a minute. It was his first introduction to Susan. In describing the points of the little car, I told him that when the engine was running there was a leakage from the electric accumulators through the cap of the radiator.

"Why!" What does it do?" asked Bat.

"It gives you a little shock, nothing to speak of. Touch it."

Bat bent down and examined the cap suspiciously. Then he slowly approached his forefinger; pulled it away apprehensively; advanced it again; drew it back, and at last made a little dab and lightly touched the brass. At the same moment I let off the hooter at his elbow.

Bat tries to compensate himself for the shock of this experience by playing the trick on everyone he can inveigle. His method does not, however, inspire confidence, and he never produces an effect at all equal to the agonized convulsion with which he rewarded me.

When Bat came down to breakfast he sniffed the steam of his coffee with gusto.

"I'll tell you what it is, 'T,'" he said; "I made a mistake with that cheese last night."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, it does not do to take a cheese like that just before going to bed. It persists. One can't forget it. One lies awake in bed and feels one is getting tired of cheese. One does not look forward to tomorrow's cheese as much as one ought."

"Did you dream of it?"

"No, I didn't dream of it. In point of fact, I dreamed I was down a drain. You know, there's something queer about that cheese. It's a very tenacious cheese. I shall pass cheese today."

It was while we were walking down to the river half an hour later that Bat startled me by telling me that he was thinking of getting married.

I stood for a moment. The idea of dear old Bat Vernon being married gave me quite a shock. It seemed such a solemn idea for Bat. It was as though he were taking a step towards death. Birth, Mar-

riage, Death—that is the epitome of human life given in the front page of the daily papers. It was distressing to think of Bat as already preparing for his coffin. These thoughts flashed through my mind. I was incredulous.

"Rot!" I exclaimed.

"It's a solemn fact," said Bat. "You ask Kate Vassaleur if it isn't."

He was engaged, then! A gulf seemed to open between us. I said complainingly:

"Well, you need not have told me so soon. You might at least have waited till I was seeing you off."

"Why?" said Bat. "It won't make any difference."

"It's all very well," he went on, "but I'll tell you what it is. It's no good putting off a job like this till you are too old. Some of these girls—the pick of them, in fact—are confoundedly particular, you must know that. I'm going to begin to get bald soon. Can you fancy me wanting to marry the sort of girl who would be content with a husband who showed a bald place behind when he had his hat on?"

"But that does not apply to me. I am not going to get bald yet."

"Oh, well, there are worse things than going bald," said Bat. "You're just the sort of chap to get up one fine morning and find hair growing out of your ears."

I was annoyed with Bat. It is no joking matter growing old. On the other hand, were these the

reasons that induce men to marry? There is a mystery about it. Has Bat really opened my eyes? Has he let me into a secret?

Bat was eager to get to work on Edward. When we turned off the road he pounded along the back in his stockings with half-leg spats, and his frieze coat with leather collar and buttons, and lots of waist, scaring the trout, which fled from him up and down the stream, and spoiling the fishing for an hour to come. The Watcher's cottage, with a six-foot spiked iron fence and barbed wire tangled along the top, appeared in view. We passed through a gate. A woman came out to the door.

"Any tickets for the Sweep, gentlemen?"

Bat presented himself as a candidate. He had many questions to ask. Would he have a better chance if he bought two tickets? What sort of a hook did Edward like best? Could he see the money in the pool so as to get an appetite for the job? and so forth. The woman did not respond to his banter. He paid two shillings—one to the pool, and one for the Watcher. The woman told us that the total amount of the pool was twenty-seven pounds sixteen. Bat asked whether she had counted in *his* shilling, or whether he would get that back in addition. "I want to know exactly how I stand," he explained.

After we left the cottage he went back and asked for an introduction. "I have never met Edward," he said. "Where is he?"

The woman complained that her husband was

about somewhere, but, not seeing him, she put on some clogs and led us down to the river. At a place where the current had eroded a small bay below an alder bush she peered over the bank, pointed downwards, and left us.

We advanced cautiously and looked, and behold! there was Edward. He floated like a balloon in a deep swirl of water sweeping under the bank. He was about two feet below the surface, and he swung as immovably in the heavy current as though he had been anchored. One had to look closely to notice the almost imperceptible movement of the mighty tail of the huge fish. He was well aware that we were looking at him, for he careened over to one side a little so as to bring an eye to bear on us. It was evident that he was distrustful.

Bat glanced cautiously about him, slowly raised the handle of his landing-net above his shoulder, and sent it with all his force, like a javelin, fiercely down upon Edward's devoted head. It would have been a blackguard act in anyone but Bat, but it seemed that Edward was used to it. As the shaft cut the water he jerked his head to one side like a boxer avoiding a straight left, and it missed him by two inches. Bat hastily made another wild stab, on which Edward glided forward with perfect dignity until he was lost in the shadows of deeper water.

"They'll put you in prison," I said. "You've got to kill him by fair fly-fishing. You've spoilt your chance for this morning now."

"I wasn't trying to kill him," said Bat. "I only wanted to stun him a bit and muddle up his brains. It's almost useless trying to catch a fish like that when his head is clear. It's just what you experts can never understand."

I left him, after arranging that he should go on up stream and that I would fish the Legewater and come down and meet him at one o'clock for lunch.

I had a pleasant morning, and my bag held three good trout and two grayling. What more does a man want? I had returned several fish to the water. For each I landed I missed another, and rose two besides. My morning had been one of keen entrancing occupation, both of mind and body, with the gaiety of a careless summer holiday to set it off; tobacco to give it tone; and strong boots and tough old threadbare tweeds to give it dignity. I have no sympathy with a man who vaunts large baskets. When I have caught a score of trout I begin to feel like a fishmonger.

I filled up my bag with stones and grass, put the fish on top with the tail of one grayling and the head of the other sticking out, so as to give Bat the impression that I had a bagful topped off with a three-pounder, and set off to join him and the lunch.

I could not find him. I followed the river till the Watch Cottage was near at hand—still no Bat. I was standing at a loss when I noticed the flash of his rod. I then saw that he was reclining on the

bank, his head supported on his hand, fishing Edward's pitch. With serene contentment in his face he was idly throwing his line into the water and, after a rather long pause, snatching it out again. No one ever rose a fish by such methods.

"Have you moved him?" I asked as I came up, using a term by which a fly-fisher expresses that a fish has nosed at, or shown an interest in the fly.

"Oh, yes," Bat replied, reeling up his line, "he's moving about all right. He's getting restless. He'll jump out onto the bank soon. There are too many hooks about today for his liking."

I then saw that Bat was fishing with four flies tied to his line. It was futile. No one ever used anything but one small fly on such water.

He told me, as he ate his sandwiches, that he had been fishing the same spot all the morning. He lay down because he got tired of sitting up. He said that at different times two fishermen had come up to see, as Bat put it, "Whether Edward was engaged or not." Bat had invited the second to join him, telling him that there was "plenty of room," but he, too, had gone off like the first.

I left Bat in the act of tying on a fifth fly, and made a cut across two fields to the upper Legewater where it approaches the Fradford road.

It was about half-past four when I heard the first shouts. They arrested me at once, but I did not immediately realize they were cries for help. I ran



back into the meadow in order to get the direction, and it was then I recognized Bat's voice and knew he was fast into Edward. I ran like a hare.

He was standing on the bank, with his legs bare to the knee, gripping his rod like an infantryman with bayonet fixed at the "ready." The woman had come out of the cottage and was by his side holding her skirts with one hand. A motor-car with ladies in it had stopped on the bridge; and three youths in new caps, with roses in their buttonholes, and very long walking sticks, were charging across from the road with a dog.

"Hold your rod up," I panted. "Keep your line taut."

"Leave me alone," said Bat. "He can use all the line I've got."

It seemed quite hopeless. I stood by with the landing-net and looked on.

The fish, for some reason, made no attempt to run. At one moment he was a catherine-wheel on the surface; the next, only the eddies indicated his struggles in the deep. After a time these struggles became less violent. The ladies from the motor-car announced their presence by a strong smell of peppermint.

Minutes passed, and it began to look as though Bat had got the fish.

"If you could lead him in, I might manage to net him," I said.

Edward replied by a strong flurry, and was then

slowly towed, motionless and inert, into view. He was trussed up like a whiting, head to tail, with Bat's line tangled about him. It was as though he had been spinning a cocoon.

"There you are," Bat said. "I told you he could use all the line I could give him."

A few moments later I was able to get the net under the fish and lift him safely to the bank. The impossible had happened. Bat had caught Edward.

"Be careful he doesn't jump in again," Bat said warningly.

At that moment a man pressed forward.

"Hullo! What's this here?" he asked.

"This is Edward here," said Bat, lighting his pipe as I set about getting the hooks out.

"You must put him back again, young gentleman, he ain't caught fair," said the man ominously.

"My job was to catch Edward with the artificial fly," said Bat, "and scoop the pool, and I've brought it off."

"I keeps this water, and I say you must put him back," the man reiterated. "He's foul hooked."

"Well, that's nothing to do with me," said Bat. "You're his keeper, you say, you trained the fish, and if he doesn't know better than to take the fly under his wing like a swallow, it's your look-out."

"He's foul hooked, and that ain't fair fishing," the keeper said, and he took a step towards me as I stooped over the fish.

"You might as well say it isn't fair cricket if you

try for a drive and snick it through the slips," I told him; "of course it's fair."

"Why, you can see for yourself he's taken off his stockings," the keeper complained. "That's another thing. Wading is not allowed; it's all printed clear on the back of the ticket."

"I was sitting with my feet in the water," Bat explained. "It sends the blood to the head, and that's where one wants it when one tackles a job like this, I can tell you."

I felt ashamed of Bat. Fishing is a dignified sport, and it is strictly so regarded by all true fishermen. Bat, however, made the stupendous event of his capture of Edward a broad absurdity. To my adept eye he looked almost revolting as he stood on the bank with naked legs in his elaborate new patent sporting coat.

We overbore the keeper, who had to put a good face on it. Edward was withdrawn from the water, where I had placed him securely bagged in the net, and knocked on the head, and we went to the cottage to weigh in. The scales announced six pounds seven and a quarter ounces.

When we came out the throng had increased, as people passing along the road and seeing the staring crowd thought someone had been drowned, and came running up like chickens expecting food. We marched into Fradford at the head of a procession of a dozen boys and men, all treading on each other's heels in

their eagerness to keep an eye on Edward, who, slung tail and head like a salmon, was borne by Bat himself. When we turned into the Lamb Hotel we left a crowd in the road outside.

Edward was laid in state on the top of the counter between the tap and the bar parlor. We gloated over him till seven o'clock, and then tore ourselves away to change our things, and came back and stared at him till dinner was served.

We had hardly finished the meal when the landlord entered and said that Mr. Wrench and Mr. Plenty were very anxious to speak to us. Mr. Wrench and Mr. Plenty were distinguished local anglers, the landlord explained.

They were shown in and sat down awkwardly, and Bat called for drinks.

Mr. Wrench was a hardy, stout, red-faced, intent-looking man with grizzled hair and a bald forehead. He sat on the extreme edge of his chair with an elbow on one knee and leant forward dangling his hat. Mr. Plenty was a pale, wedge-faced young man, with a long thin neck and straw-colored hair brushed up into a quiff on his forehead. He sat stiffly, as though he had been put into his chair and was waiting to be carried upstairs on it.

"I've just been to see Edward," Mr. Wrench addressed us both gravely, jerking his head towards the bar, "and they tell me it was one of you two gentlemen who caught him. Mr. Plenty here took the fish they named Archie, four seasons ago, five

pounds two ounces and three shot," he added, introducing his companion. Mr. Plenty cast down his eyes and swallowed audibly.

I indicated Bat, who lay at full length on the sofa and smoked a cigar, as the hero of the exploit, and he was at once closely questioned by Mr. Wrench on the events of the day. Bat replied that he had really very little of interest to tell them. Yes; it was he that had caught Edward. No; the fish did not rise often. In his opinion patience, more than anything else, was what had won the day—patience combined with the new principles of piscatology.

Here Bat paused to examine his cigar, while Mr. Plenty regarded him fixedly with his lip drooping, and Mr. Wrench shifted further forward in his chair and pressed his questions.

What were these new principles? Oh, merely to create a false sense of security in the fish, Bat told him. How was it done? Why, in various ways; for instance, one sat with one's legs splashing in the water as though one were going to bathe, or tied a handkerchief on to one's rod so that the fish would suppose one was out flag-flapping with the boy scouts. That day he had whistled up a dog and pitched him in on top of Edward, and made him swim about a bit, and bark. As a result Edward had been completely deceived, and so he had caught him.

No; he had not changed his flies often. One fly had certainly caught Edward the most, but others had lent a hand. What fly was it? Oh, simply a

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*fly*—feathers and tail; they knew what a fly was like.

Mr. Wrench seemed balked. He squatted forward until he appeared to lose contact with his chair altogether, as if, in fact, he were merely pointing to it with his back.

"What I mean, what sort of fly was it?" he blurted. "What's its name, as you may say?"

Bat does not know the names of any flies, but prefers to invent grotesque nicknames for such as he can recognize. Most of these are extremely insulting to the natural insect and quite inadmissible in print. He stirred a little, exhaled smoke, and carefully knocked off the ash.

"Blue Wagtail," he said negligently, as he put the cigar back in his mouth.

"Blue Wagtail! I never heard of such," said Mr. Wrench. "Did *you* ever?" he added, making contact with his chair again and turning to his companion.

Mr. Plenty shook his head, and both men stared mutely at Bat.

"A blue Wagtail," said Bat, tolerantly, "is a fly that wags its tail besides being blue. That is what a fish likes—to see a blue fly wag its tail. The wagtail wagged its tail, and that made Edward wag his tail, and so at last they got friendly like two ducks, and then Edward ate him."

Mr. Wrench gazed at Mr. Plenty, then at me, and then again at Bat, in a baffled way. Then he said

suddenly to Bat, who was looking at his watch:

"Where do you get these Wagtail flies, if I may be allowed to ask?"

"I make them," Bat replied, after a moment's thought.

"Oh; could you show me one now, perhaps, if it's not a trouble to you?"

"They're all eaten," said Bat. "Edward had the last."

Mr. Wrench looked perplexed, but seemed to remember himself. "Well now, how would you go for to make one of these Wagtails; could you tell me, if I may be so bold?" he said.

"The first thing," said Bat, getting up and emphasizing his points by tapping Mr. Wrench, who had also risen, on the chest intimately, "is to catch a nice young blue parrot and pull its tail out. Select only the tastiest morsels and construct the fly in the usual way, being careful to choose a good sharp hook. I'm going to see how Edward is getting on," he concluded. "Are you coming?"

I was afraid that Bat was about to embark on absurdities which would ruin his little show, for it was clear that it would be as easy to joke with a mole and a frog as with Messrs. Wrench and Plenty on the sacred subject of fly-fishing.

If these two gentlemen formed part of the company which that evening thronged the tap and the bar parlor, where Bat stood guard, so to speak, over Edward, they had further drinks without paying for

them, and perhaps got to know that they had had their legs pulled. I do not think that Bat Vernon ever spent a happier evening in his life. An earnest fisherman, who felt that in the capture of Edward he had attained the highest ambition of his art, would have been a person to commiserate in the light of the radiant felicity of Bat. It was the very knowledge of his own ignorance and futility as a fly-fisher that provoked his impish humor and made his false position an exquisite delight to him. If anything could have added to his pleasure it would have been to know that he had caught Edward with a feather and a bit of string, or a lady's hat on the end of a clothes line.

His listeners were a mixed company and, as Bat stood beside Edward inviting inquiry, his whimsies were at first received with serious perplexity. But after a little bursts of laughter marked his intimate speculations on Edward's connubial ambitions, and he was surrounded by a broadly smiling audience.

After leaving him for an hour, I drew near again.

"Come along to bed," I said. "You've got to have breakfast at seven if you are going to catch the early train."

We saw Edward safely into the larder, where Bat had him put into a tub of water. "I want him to feel quite at home," he told the Boots. I left him in close talk with the landlord.

Just as I was ready for bed, he came into my room.



"That's all right," he said, "I'm not too late. I always like to keep my promises. Now *do* attend; you remember that time, don't you; *you* know; no, really, honor bright, this is serious—when we were talking last night, I mean? Well, look here, I was afraid I was too late, the fellow kept me downstairs, but I promised—you remember—that I would tell you exactly what Edward weighed before you got into bed to-night. Well, I'm going to do it now. Do listen. He weighs exactly eleven pounds and seven and a quarter ounces when wet, and a trifle less when dry. Can you recollect that, or would you like me to write it down for you? Next week, of course, it's quite likely he may weigh a pound or two more."

I was just dropping off to sleep when he came back in his pajamas.

"Look here," he said, "I've got a bone to pick with you."

"What's wrong?"

"Why, about that fish."

"Well?"

"Well, I've made a big mistake about Edward, and it's your fault, I tell you."

"What have I done?"

"What have you done! Why, you've killed Edward; that's what."

"But, good gracious," I said, "you couldn't keep him alive."

"Of course I could," Bat replied. "Tub of water and a wheelbarrow."

"But why? What's your idea?"

"Well, it's no fun catching a dead fish, is it? Edward's been wasted, that's how I look at it. He's done for, and no good for anything but to be stretched and stuffed—he will stretch well, I can see there's loose skin about him."

"Do you mean that you wanted to go on catching him?"

"Of course I did. I should have taken him home and put him in the fountain with the goldfish, and now you've killed him. He would have had lots of sport. I might have caught him before breakfast on fine mornings, and my old uncle could have been wheeled in to have a go at him. We would have kept rods set up in the hall and gone and put hooks in him after dinner—no end of fun with the ladies; and now you've spoilt it all."

## CHAPTER V

### TRAGIC EXPERIECES AT CAFF PADDIX

**O**N the Monday morning, after I had taken Bat to the station and was just finishing breakfast, a telegram arrived from my mother: "Mrs. Graham wants you to let her know beforehand."

I suppose my mother wrote to Mrs. Graham and fished for an invitation. She had my address, as I sent her a post card on Saturday night.

It is a nuisance to have arrangements made for me and to be under obligations to keep engagements. It is exactly what I do not want, but my mother considers that my plans for turning up uninvited are an unheard-of breach of good manners.

However, I decided to go on to Hildon Hall, as it was a pleasant run of about 130 miles, and I should have some justification for presenting myself. After the way I funk'd The Benson I was beginning to lose faith in my hardihood.

Before I left Fradford I bought the bottle of olives for Nita. I thought I might as well send them. There is nothing, of course, in a bottle of stuffed olives!

Afterwards I felt uncertain, and I went back to the grocer's without knowing exactly what to do. The fact is women are rather a nuisance to have about one, and they really can be almost unpleasant sometimes: at least Nita can. It is impertinent to tell a man, just because you happen to be his step-niece by marriage, that he is selfish, and greedy, and arrogant, and lord knows what else. Not that I care what Nita says, of course; besides, she was joking all the time, I know that. Still, it is unpleasant. I found the grocer had made up the parcel for posting, so I let it go. It was a small bottle, only. Afterwards I went back again and wrote on the cover, "To be kept in a cool dry place till I return." All the same, I wish I had not sent it now. Nita will suppose I mind what she thinks of me.

Susan did not behave that day, and I had trouble with the bent threepenny bit that serves the valve tappit. After that I took the wrong road, and finally I decided to stay a day or two with Mrs. Connagh if the old girl should be game. This was the beginning of much trouble.

I consider that my claim to be a careful driver is made incontestable by the fact that in twenty thousand miles I have killed nothing but one chicken, and it was the chicken's fault. But I don't want to beat about the bush. If the reader refers to the list of my final selections on page 16 he will see that Mrs. Connagh's description is completed by the words "and dogs." Well, to make a clean breast of it (and it

was a miserable business), the fact is that as we were trundling up the drive Susan ran over one of these dogs. A small pack of cream poodles and chocolate Poms ran out of the shrubbery right into the car; I felt a wheel lift and there was the poor little brute laid out in the road behind. Mercifully it was killed outright. The notice, "Mind the Dogs," which I had seen at the entrance gates, had evidently been set up out of concern for the dogs, rather than, as I had supposed, in apprehension for the visitors' trousers.

To run over the dog is quite one of the worst ways of introducing yourself uninvited at a friend's house. I felt this keenly as I stared back at the blot of brown fur on the road. It was just as if a lady had dropped her muff. It was some moments before I got out of the car, and even then I did not know what I was going to do. I felt stunned.

I do not say for a moment that I did the right thing. I only claim to have acted with the best intentions.

It was at once clear that I could not turn the car round and go away and say nothing about it. That was unthinkable. Nor could I bring myself to approach the house, a hopeful candidate for the spare bed, dangling my hostess' pet as though I had come with an offering of game. Nor could I endure the idea of waiting in the drawing-room with "I want you to come and see what I've got in my car" trembling on my lips. Besides, if I were not careful, Mrs. Connagh might receive a shock. It was a difficult

question. In the end I decided to hide the little body in the shrubbery; find the first convenient opportunity of breaking the news to my hostess; and then, if she wished, show her the sad little remnant of her pet. Accordingly I carried the poor little lady into the plantation and hid her among the undergrowth.

It was when I approached the front door and a deluge of dogs rushed upon the scene from all directions, that it occurred to me that one or two, more or less, might not be of much account. I also wondered if the creature would actually be missed—if I had not decided, of course, to break the news, I mean.

I had always remembered that while Mrs. Connagh honored you with a call, her dogs employed themselves by scratching the paint off your front door or making hay of the geraniums; but I had no idea of the hold her hobby had taken on her until this visit of mine to Caff Paddox. I can only say that the house has been entirely given up to the dogs and that Mrs. Connagh resides in their kennel. The gardens are spoiled; the house is dingy. It is bitten, scratched, stained and torn from top to bottom.

I was shown into what the dogs had left of the drawing-room. One of the chocolate Poms with a bandaged leg was taking care of itself on the sofa. The furniture was scratched and dirty; the carpet spoilt; the hearthrug in part eaten. The hopelessness of keeping pace with the destructiveness of the dogs seemed to have had a disheartening effect on

things that were out of their reach. Cobwebs hung on the curtain-poles, and dusty bits of evergreen, presumably the remains of Christmas decorations, still lolled over the picture-frames. Upon the mantel-piece was a row of silver cups each inscribed with a date and the name of the dog whose ability in being a dog had won the distinction for its owner.

Mrs. Connagh walked briskly into the room, a little riding-switch in her hand and a swarm of dandy dogs about her heels, with an air as though she were entering a public arena to give a display. It was obvious that she liked to vaunt her pets and that she glowed with the distinction of the number and quality of those about her. She was dressed in stylish tweeds which she showed off well, for she is slick in the haunch and carries her head like a racer. She wore smart boots and gauntleted gloves on remarkably neat hands, and her gray hair was swept up under a tweed hat. A large brass safety-pin, under her ear, called attention, oddly, to a flannel bandage about her neck which had worked up into view.

She greeted me warmly; said that of course I would stay; and ran on with questions about my mother and my journey. As she talked, her eyes kept wandering about among the dogs, of whom she soon began to speak, sitting with one of them on her knees which repeatedly licked her face in spite of her half-hearted gestures of avoidance.

Many celebrities were pointed out to me. The Pom with the bandaged foot was specially introduced as

having had its leg broken by a brutal motorist in the front drive. There was no excuse, she declared, with the notice staring everyone in the face.

As she rattled on an old bulldog staggered into the room with his legs wide apart, as though he felt the spin of the earth and was afraid of being thrown down. He came to me; sniffed in friendly inquiry; then chirruped with suppressed delight; wagged his tail; put his head sentimentally on my knee and slobbered on me. Mrs. Connagh, without pausing in her account of Ribstone the fifth, got up; went to a drawer; handed me a red calico duster; and when I had mopped my trouser, put it away again. In its way, it was evidently a well-ordered house. The second time the bulldog stamped me with the mark of his esteem Mrs. Connagh explained that he always did it as tea-time approached. So that was all right.

It was after tea, when the other dogs had been driven out of the room and the bulldog had cleared up all the bread and butter and finished the tea out of the slop-basin, that Mrs. Connagh asked me suddenly, as though opening up a fresh subject, whether I would like to "see the dogs." I had been quite unable to come to the point of confession. No opening was allowed me. I had to go and inspect the animals, knowing that every minute made my task more difficult. I began at last to try and think that I had not killed any dog at all. It seemed impossible I could have such a crime on my shoulders.



We went over the house. The dogs were kennelled in the rooms ; six, eight, or a dozen in each. In some rooms they used the beds ; in one, hutches had been set up. They were delicate dogs, Mrs. Connagh explained, and, besides, they had to be trained as house pets. A bathroom had been adapted to the purpose of a dogs' toilet, and here a burly woman was squatting on the floor gloomily clipping a poodle. The dogs were tended by women. They were ladies' dogs. They did not "understand men." The attic floor was given up to the purposes of an infectious disease hospital. A door was opened. Six dogs tried to get out. What sort were they? "Mange." Another door, "Distemper." Another "Influenza." It was all so well arranged! There was a room set entirely apart for one dog who was doing his course of influenza and mange at the same time. Yet another door and the dogs all had flannel bandages round their necks, fastened under the ear with a big safety-pin. Complaint unknown. Difficulty in swallowing. Mrs. Connagh here appeared to swallow, and with difficulty. I myself seemed to be conscious of a retarded mechanism in my own throat when I secretly tested it. My wish that I had never come increased.

Dinner had all the discomfort of a meal taken immediately before departure on a journey. There seemed somehow to be a dozen things to be thought of at once. Mrs. Connagh kept looking at her watch. She was expecting the vet., she said. I tried to

interest her with an account of the exploits of my bulldog pup "Bruiser." Bruiser was given to me because he needed a change of postmen. He had bitten one. I knew nothing about his points, but I sent him to our local Dog and Cat Show, and put him in for everything just to see what he could do for himself. To my delight he carried off three first prizes—value, one pound seventeen—and seemed to think nothing of it. He won first prize for being the best Bulldog in the show; first prize for being the best Grayhound in the show; and first prize for being the best tom-cat in the show. Mrs. Connagh could not follow this, so I had to explain that Bruiser got first prize in the bulldog class; first prize in the class reserved for bulldogs and grayhounds, and his final rival was a grayhound; and first prize for being the best animal exhibited, and as the final selection lay between Bruiser and two tom-cats, it follows that Bruiser was considered to be a better tom-cat than either of the cats were bull-dogs.

My hostess did not seem much interested in the triumphs of Bruiser, and the dessert had hardly been put on the table when the vet. arrived and she jumped up and whisked out of the room, leaving me alone.

I had begun to be haunted by a fear that some of the dogs would discover the victim and drag the carcase into view before I had had a chance of confessing, and I crept out of the house like a murderer fascinated by the scene of his crime. I breathed more freely, for it was clear that the dogs

had all been shut up for the night. None was to be seen but the bulldog and one or two pets, and the house echoed far and near with their yappings behind closed doors. Poncho came staggering after me down the drive, but soon stood and watched me out of sight. The old dog was reconciled to the limitations of age.

It was getting dark when I reached the scene of the accident and turned into the plantation, and it was some time before I found the place where I had hidden the body. My little friend was gone. There was no doubt about it. Had I really killed her? I began to think it was possible I had only laid her out and that she had recovered and run off to rejoin her companions. The dogs would certainly be counted when they were shut up for the night; and I should hear about it if one were missed, for I heard about it if one sneezed. I had a possible excuse, anyhow. I was not absolutely certain she had been killed.

When I returned, Mrs. Connagh was seeing the vet. out. The house was now silent as regards the dogs, but the three parrots, who, not being able to hear themselves speak, endured the daytime in sulky silence, had now brightened up and were all yapping and howling without pause, and thus it is that things are kept cheerful at Caff Paddox both day and night.

Mrs. Connagh mentioned nothing about having lost a dog. She rattled along with accounts of all the

vet. had said of her various invalids, and we finished the evening with a game of chess in which I was beaten by my hostess, two parrots, and a dog whom I was asked not to "encourage."

It was only ten o'clock when I said good night. My room seemed to have been kept holy. The bed, on examination, appeared to be a virgin bed; but I had grounds for revising that judgment ten minutes after I got into it. This was not the only reason I could not sleep, however. I worried over the dog. I came to believe that my search in the plantation had not been thorough. Then, being turned upon gloomy thoughts, I was reminded of Bat's solemn admission, and began to ponder his remarks about getting too old for the job—i.e. marriage. I counted up how many years it would take before I was seventy-three, which always appears to me a most difficult age to face. There seemed very few of them when one came to think of it. Until one is seventy-three there is some hope for one; after that point there is none—one has simply got to throw up the sponge. I counted how many times I should live over again the number of years since I left school before I reached this dreadful age. The figure was eight only. I had never realized this before. This was serious. The matter needed close attention.

After a while I settled down to test myself against Williams. I know his age, for he told us in the train one morning, and he told the ticket collector too. For some reason he seemed to be immensely

gratified by the fact that his age was what it was. Well, I had to face the fact that in seventeen years I shall be as old as Williams is. It was appalling. But there was worse to come. In barely seven years I should be as old as Williams was only ten years ago! I could hardly realize it. I did the sum again. It was awful. What was seven years? I was aghast. I had been actually living in a fool's paradise. I tried it in many ways, but all comparisons brought me face to face with such deadly facts as: that by the time I am as old as Williams will be, when I am as old as he is now, *Williams will be on the very verge of seventy-three.*

I felt frightened. It was no good trying to disguise the fact: I was beginning to get old. That was the idea I had to get used to. Old age. Perhaps after all there was some sense in the grave view Tabb seemed to take of life. I had brought his book with me as part of Susan's ballast, and I got out of bed and found it. I took the opportunity as I passed the dressing-table to have a close look at my ears in the glass. They were still all right, thank goodness.

I opened Tabb at random, and dabbed a finger on to a page to try my luck. All divines should be equal to this test if they are worth their salt, but it seems that Tabb is not on working terms with Providence. When I looked I found I had fetched a paragraph where Tabb endeavors to disentangle, from the confusion caused by the sublimity of his own dic-

tion, the childish idea that to bestow benefits on others is to win their affection. No generalization could well be less true of human nature. It must, however, be admitted, in justice to Tabb, that on this occasion, at any rate, he did the trick; for what with the numbers of us there were kicking about together in the bed, and our general restlessness, and Tabb's pompous diction and smug incompetence, I was made so angry that I did not care whether I was getting old or not, and so went to sleep at last.

I was awakened in the morning by the voice of my hostess resounding in the room through the open window, "Drop it, sir!" "Drop it, I say!" followed by deafening yaps and barks, and became aware that the dog I had been told not to "encourage" was in the room. He had evidently come in with the hot water. I drove him out.

In the bath-room, which passed muster, I got hold of a bit of soap that smelt gratefully aseptic. I soon noticed that it was of a bracing quality, and at first I was thankful for the pacifying effect it had on a rash I had contracted during the night, but soon I found that it was too drastic, so to speak, and was taking my enamel off; and on inspection I discovered that the detestable word "DOG" still survived in embossed letters on its wasted shape. I rinsed myself thoroughly, but I shall never be the sleek man I was. It has taken away all my gloss. My velvet touch has gone. I am for ever spoilt for purposes of satin embraces.

I was horribly worried about the dog. I had no doubt that I missed him the night before. I felt ashamed of myself. It seemed a very easy thing to confess to the accident, compared with the explanation I now had to make. The wretched animal was positively spoiling my holiday. I cut myself in shaving. Finally I decided, in a sort of anger, to make a clean breast of it at breakfast and get it over. I was, however, still desperately racking my brains to find a loophole for escape as I went heavy-footed downstairs.

Then, three steps from the bottom, I clapped my fist into my palm and exclaimed, "By jove, I've got it!" with such effect that some thirty dogs came rushing at me, and Mrs. Connagh ran out to pacify them. I beamed as I returned her greeting and followed her to the breakfast-room.

Mrs. Connagh appeared a little subdued. She only became her usual alert self for a moment when I returned from the side-table after cutting myself three slices of tongue. I had helped myself to mustard and had got hold of my fork, when she jumped up and took the plate away from me.

"Not that one. It's Poncho's " she said. Then she added, as though to remove any embarrassment I might feel at having committed a *faux pas* of the breakfast-table, "He licks it so clean, you would never know he had used it."

A little later she broke a silence of the dogs by saying:

"I'm one short this morning."

"Indeed," I said. "How's that?"

Mrs. Connagh shrugged. "They must have missed count last night. So careless! It's one of the Poms."

"Don't you know which?"

"I have not sorted them out yet. The names are on the collars. There are so many it is difficult to remember them all, but I think it must be either Binch, Virtue, or Max the Third, or perhaps Riff or Bramble—it wont take long to find out."

"I like those little chocolate Poms," I said. "I wish you could let me have one."

Mrs. Connagh became interested at once. I closed the deal for a bitch rising two years, and I was to have the pick of eight. My choice fell on Casca the Second.

Gaily I waved farewell to my hostess as, an hour later, she ran round Susan, shepherding a cloud of her pets from the wheels; and gaily we bowled down the drive with half a dozen truants running behind and yapping at Casca, who, with her pretty little ears cocked, looked wistfully over the door from among the golf-sticks and fishing-rods.

At a certain point I cautiously slowed down; stopped; and then slipped away through the shrubbery. In the plantation the dogs soon led me to find what I had overlooked the night before. It was "Viccy." I took off the collar; carried the small rumpled body to the car; packed it away on the floor; put the collar on Casca and Casca's in my pocket, and



set her down to run with her little relatives. Then once more, with a light heart, I gave Susan the gears, burst out upon the sunny highway and laid a course for Hildon Hall.

## CHAPTER VI

### HILDON HALL

**I** HAVE been at Hildon more than a week and it is quite all right—though I never thought I could have made it out with a pack of girls for such a long time—but the hour is coming when I must say “good-bye” and give the Grahams a rest. The fact is that little Nibbs is getting badly on my nerves, though not—I am thankful to say—on those particular nerves to which she applies herself so untiringly. If it were not that she is a young lady I should describe little Nibbs as a public nuisance.

To begin with, I don't like very little girls with watery voices who remind you of the small apple that the shopman throws into the bag as a gift; neither do I admire impossibly tiny feet squeezed into kid-topped boots, and little chinese hands with rings on half the fingers and gold bangles slipping down over the knuckles. Also I have lately found out, from being talked at by Nibbs, that I don't like the writings of John Ruskin; and hate miniatures; and detest old china; and that the older the china is

the more I loathe it. To me sculpture is a bore, and I don't know why they do it; and I say—although I don't set up to be an authority—that all the old masters were cock-eyed. I said it to Nibbs, and she tried to find the word in the calf-bound dictionary which has been requisitioned to make little Nibbs high enough on the seat of the morning room piano to play Grieg's *Wedding March* six times a day without fatigue. I admit that it is the sort of wedding march that anyone might wish for who was being married to little Nibbs, but if it is played as a hint to me it quite misses its point. Sorry, Nibbs—but it does! In fact it expresses her in such a deadly way that I cannot now sit in the room while a wedding march session is in progress. This, indeed, is a house where every prospect pleases and only Nibbs is vile. That prospect comprises Mrs. Graham, and Maud, Valerie and Rachel Graham, besides Miss Wyndacotte (Beatrice) from Magnolia Lodge, the Druce girls, and others. I never used to care much for Rachel as a name. It always suggested a girl who made everyone uncomfortable in her indulgence of a weakness for self-sacrifice. I find I was wrong. Rachel is a very pretty name.

I flushed Hildon Hall at the propitious hour of one o'clock. It is a large four-square, stuccoed house, with a Doric portico; stands in a fine park; and is surrounded on three sides by fine gardens of the "landscape" type. There are wonderful lawns dotted with noble beeches, and dense rhododendron shrub-

beries that partly screen from view a large pool.

Graham married late but was consoled by a young wife, and Mrs. Graham has spent almost all her life in the character of a widow with three daughters who have grown up in this luxurious home like three princesses in a castle. Rachel, the youngest, has only thrown off the fetters of the schoolroom for a few months. Maud and Valerie are some years older.

Mrs. Graham is an elastic matron of—well, say forty odd, with marks of arrested growth that date, no doubt, from the day of her widowhood. Her sentiments were formed under the influence of the sepulchral era which followed the death of the Prince Consort. She actually wears a long chain made of human hair linked with gold, and a locket that has a glass back and yet more hair, and she wears two mourning rings with a small further addition of hair in each. She has, however, been dragged along at the tail of her daughters, who, with every disadvantage of home education, Oxford frames with pictures of young women in nightgowns clinging to slaps of rock in a storm, statuettes under bell jars, cut glass candlesticks and baskets of wax fruit, have yet contrived to be athletic and to identify themselves with the best that is characteristic of modern girlhood. The mother has a little the air of being a general officer in command. She keeps things up to the mark. The girls do what they are supposed to do. The nine gardeners work seriously—as though they

knew they had better not leave off. The butler and two footmen bear themselves as if "master" were about; in fact, the butler seems to be a broken man. He has formed a habit of grudging obedience like a tamed lion. Mrs. Graham meets his sulkiness with dignified, gentle ferocity. It is, no doubt, mere usage, and there is no feeling on either side.

The lady was crossing the entrance hall as I gave my name, and hurried to greet me. I followed her to the boudoir. The girls were somewhere about, she said. A Miss Farquhar was staying with them; there were no other guests. Would I like my things carried up to my room, so that I could take the car to the stables?

She rang the bell, and after a pause, which would just have given the butler time to get to the door if he had been standing on the mark with running corks, she took hold of it again and wrenched at it two or three times fiercely, but quite amiably. Shortly afterwards the door began to open so mysteriously that I found myself staring at it and wondering what was going to happen. It was the butler entering.

"Yes, we all had a very pleasant six weeks in Town," my hostess said, when the butler had received his orders and retired, "and I was thankful to get away from house worries. We stayed at De Vere Mansions, as you know, and took our meals in the restaurant. I gave a couple of dinners, and the girls had a number of dances and theater parties, and ought to consider themselves lucky young women.

I feel all the better for the rest—ah! here they are,” she broke off: “you know Maude and Valerie, let me introduce you to Miss Farquhar.”

This was my first meeting with little Nibbs. She held up her hand as if she thought I might like to kiss it; looked at me glitteringly; and then turned about to show off her pretty little figure.

Maude and Valerie exhibited their usual fresh comely faces, and if in country clothes they looked a little less tapering and sylph-like than when I saw them last in London, there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, I like it better. It is more wholesome. It is less disturbing to my peace of mind; I prefer girls in mufti. I come of Puritan stock, and when I see a girl exquisitely dressed I suffer from conflicting ambitions; and one of those ambitions is to get to work on her with an axe. Little Nibbs seems to think that the whole duty of a woman is to make herself look wicked, and I believe that if she did not do it so badly I should have had those two worrying little feet off her before now; for the same reason that if I found myself in the stalls of a musical-comedy theater with a gun, I should be impelled to shoot at the stage. My respect for womankind would demand it of me.

While I was passing the time of day with Maude and Valerie I became aware that Bates had come into the room and was standing dejectedly as if he were poised to make a “dead man’s dive,” which is a high dive with the arms held to the sides. Mrs.

Graham indicated that he wished to speak to me.

"Do you wish everything taken out of the car conveyed to your room, sir?"

"Yes," I told him, "except the golf clubs and those things. Perhaps they could stay downstairs."

Bates drooped towards me, and turned to leave the room, but a moment later he was back again as before.

"Do you wish the dog conveyed to your room, sir?"

"The dog!" I exclaimed.

"Oh! have you brought a dog?" cried Valerie.

"Where is he?"

"No, I haven't brought any . . . Oh yes—of course, yes—No. Not upstairs—It'll come out—Yes. That's all right, thanks.—No, I've not brought any dog," I explained to the girls. "He's made a mistake. It's quite all right—I'll go and show him. There's no trouble about it—I shan't be a minute—I must just go and see what he means," and I nodded cheerfully to the company and led the way out, shutting the door behind Bates.

"What on earth made you say that before the ladies?" I asked.

"I thought perhaps you would not wish it conveyed to your room, sir."

"Good gracious! Of course not! I forgot all about it. I'll take it round to the stables."

"Why, it's gone!" I exclaimed, when I looked into

the car. Bates fell back from the entrance invitingly and I leaped up the steps again. The donkey had arranged a sort of lying-in-state for poor Vicky on a newspaper against the wall of the entrance hall.

"My dear man!" I expostulated. "Put it back quickly. The young ladies didn't see it, did they?"

"I think not, sir."

I noticed the boudoir door beginning to open. I sprang to it. Miss Farquhar's smiling face looked into mine through a six-inch opening: devouring curiosity was in her eyes. I shut the door and held it. "Quick!" I whispered, beside myself. "Put it back in the car."

Bates was evidently looking about for a footman. As a butler it did not occur to him to do the thing himself, and he was not used to finding a footman all of a sudden. He was lost.

I let go the door-handle, caught up the parcel, and rushed out to Susan. I had started the engine and was getting into the seat when Miss Farquhar came to the entrance door and stood looking down at me with a pleased smile, as though we had been playing a game.

"I see you," she said.

Once round in the stable yard, all was serene. What a mercy men are to be sure. They came round the car. They regretted the poor bitch, approved her little defaced points, and undertook her obsequies with a grave air of competence which left me to know that the little carcase would be treated



with respect. In point of fact, I found two days later that one of the stable boys had been to considerable trouble in shaping a headstone out of a bit of oak paling, and had painted the name "Vicky" and the date upon it, and set it up in the place.

As I was returning to the house I heard a firm quick step behind me and the chinking of golf clubs, and behold Rachel was laughing at me and telling me she had recognized my back. She was rosy and a little breathless with rapid walking. I knew better than to offer to carry her clubs. There is no mistake about Rachel being a very bonny lass indeed. She is a quaint little thing too; not that she is really small, however. She is less in height than her sisters, certainly, but I don't mind that. She has an oval face with high cheeks as firm as apples, which give her a slightly Japanese look. When she laughs her eyes seem to shut up, and they don't come out again until she begins to get serious. If you catch her at a thoughtful moment they are big hazel eyes. Of course her hair is brown. I don't care for fair hair such as the show Nibbs puts up with curling tongs, and crimping irons, and lotion, and electric brushes. She is quite simple and outspoken, and always sees a thing in the right way, and laughs at the right moment, and yet, at the same time, she is somehow very reserved. There is a sort of mystery about her. One wonders what is behind those funny screwed-up laughing eyes; and what does she think about when she is thoughtful? She seems to spend

much time by herself, while her sisters go in double harness most of the day. For instance, the morning I arrived she had been out practising over the five holes that have been laid out in the park. I have only seen her once in the least put out, and that was at a moment when I surprised her reading and noticed the book before I realized that she did not intend that I should. I won't say what it was, except that it was the poet The Benson is always yapping about because hardly anyone can understand him.

We got through an informal lunch with the help of the butler, two footmen, and a sort of midshipman of the servants' hall, who, though he had washed his face and brushed his hair till he appeared brand new, had evidently forgotten to look at his hands in a glass. In spite of this parade of servitors, Mrs. Graham, indicating the side-table, invited me to help myself, which I was glad to do; and the ranks opened out and let me through and pointedly ignored my operations on the sirloin and a double-cured Bradenham ham which I shall remember to my dying day.

Little Nibbs kept prodding me on the subject of the dog. It was clear she was eaten up with curiosity.

"We thought Mr. Quinn had brought a dog with him," she finally said in a pointed way to Rachel. "The butler said so. But it was a mistake after all. Isn't it funny! Mr. Quinn says there wasn't any dog, don't you, Mr. Quinn?"

At this moment Bates was filling my glass. The firmness of his hand gave me fortitude.

"There is an iron thing used to grip the wheels which some people call a dog," I said. "But I always call it a sprag, and so confusion sometimes arises."

I saw Nibbs looking at me archly over her everlasting smile as I changed the subject, but no one else seemed interested. The little wretch had compelled me to lie. It was a poisonous thing to tell fibs to those fine-spirited young women. I made up my mind to take it out of little Nibbs by all fair means. I even for a moment imagined myself frightening her in the dark.

After lunch I found a chance of privately telling Mrs. Graham all that had happened. She was amused. "It was just like Bates," she said. "He is utterly foolish, a real Simple Simon, and worth his weight in gold; a perfect godsend to me. If he tried to cheat me I should find him out at once. I always know what is in his mind, and he is the greatest comfort."

This morning I got a letter from Nita. She certainly can be almost annoying. This is how she begins:—

"DEAR T——,

"I got the olives, but I wouldn't think of devouring anything so precious. You are blossoming out at last, old man, depend on it, and this is the

first bud. I hope you feel none the worse for it. I have written your name and date on the bottle and strapped it with pink ribbon finished with a bow. It is now in the drawing-room and looks like a bottle of scent. The Verschoyles, who came in yesterday afternoon, agreed that you were getting quite sentimental in your old age. . . ."

It is really not playing the game for a girl to give a fellow away like that; besides, she knows that I sent the olives as a joke, pure and simple. Then at the end of the letter she writes:

P.S.—How is Valerie ! ! !

I don't see any point in it. Nita does not know any of the Grahams. I wonder what her idea is. Has she heard that Valerie is a very dazzling person, and is trying to pull my leg?

By the same post I received a picture postcard of Gwennie Marchmon, the "Popular Comedienne" as she entitles herself: great coarse chaps and a naked neck under a wide hat, leering eyes, and lips painfully retracted from two rows of heavy teeth like a horse preparing to bite you. It had been posted from London and redirected. I could not recognize the writing, but I supposed it was from Bat. It made me laugh, and I passed it round the table where we sat at breakfast. I wish I hadn't now. The Graham girls did not seem to think it funny when they glanced at it, and Mrs. Graham remarked, "What

a terrible looking young person," and turned it down. Thereupon little Nibbs at once stretched for it, and Mrs. Graham pushed it towards her.

As she examined it she asked:

"Do you know her, Mr. Quinn?"

I had no intention of letting Miss Nibbs worry me. The question might have been mischievous.

"I met her out motoring once," I said—"I ran over her. You can see she was still in pain when the photograph was taken."

Nibbs rapidly glanced from face to face round the table like a pretty little yellow ferret. She seemed to nose a mystery.

I have been thoroughly enjoying myself here, although I really don't know why. It is all very quiet. Nothing exciting happens. Take yesterday, for instance. After breakfast Rachel drove me into the village where she had some commissions. The girls don't ride. Mrs. Graham seems to think it is dangerous; and there is no car. They are waiting for the carriage-horses to die. Castor and Pollux are as big as giraffes, and their special duty is to prance a yard into the air for every foot of progress; to champ the bit; to rattle their silver mountings, and cover themselves with lather. Eked out with cockades for the coachman and footman, and a black silk mantle and ostrich plumes for Mrs. Graham, the whole turnout is the best contrivance for leaving visiting cards at the houses of people you don't want to know that can be

well imagined, but it does not satisfy the modern taste for getting there.

Rachel, however, has availed herself of permission to drive, by sporting a buggy and an American pacer. I hang over to one side of the bucket-seat in which we sit jambed up together, and Rachel leans forward with the reins twisted round her rather fat little thumbs, and we skim along at twenty miles an hour. What Ham exactly does with his legs I don't know, but he is a glorious little beast and seems to run on wheels. The girl can steer to an inch, and as the country people have never got rid of the idea that Ham is running away and always move to the side of the road, we streak into Lidham and out again in no time.

"I daren't look," Mrs. Graham said to me one day, turning away as Rachel came pacing round the sweep of the drive like a skater on the outside edge. "I wish you could make her drive more slowly," she added.

I did not feel able to undertake this. I have, however, been coaching Rachel at golf, and we went out after getting back yesterday. We had a pleasant morning, only marred by little Nibbs, who came creeping to us, richly dressed, and stood by looking on and listening. She managed to convey to us that, though intelligently interested, she was also bored by our commonplace employment. Rachel invited her to try her hand, and she responded with smiling condescension, but as she had no idea what to do, and

no ambition, and persisted in keeping her eye on me instead of on the ball, it was rather a nuisance. She is a pretty little witch and seems to be rolling in money, to judge from her clothes and jewels; but her dress is always impracticable and unfitted for the purpose, or indeed for any purpose except to rouse unruly passions. She is always holding her rich skirts and mincing about in fragile looking shoes, so that no one shall forget the enchantment of her femininity. How she can be so lost to what is womanly with Rachel before her as a model, is more than I can understand. There is nothing more beautiful than Rachel's feet when she is in golfing kit. If a painter wanted a subject for an Academy picture, there it is for him: Rachel's two feet—nothing else. Imagine them! She wears an Irish frieze skirt: a light black and white mixture of a bluish cast and of sensible length. Below you see rough, pale blue-gray, ribbed worsted stockings and black brogues. There is something quite bewitching in the small, hard, blunt, leather shoes, and the warm, rough stocking clothing the strong, light, shaft of the leg that carries her so gracefully. It is all Rachel's own idea, too. It is just characteristic of her. Clean, neat, serviceable, and expressive of nice feeling and feminine consciousness—for there is not an atom of mannishness about Rachel. I admire Rachel's shoes and stockings enormously. I wish I had not made that remark about her being like Maude and Valerie shaken up together in a bottle. It is true in a sense, but Nita

will joke about it and people will not understand how I meant it.

After lunch I slipped away to read, as I generally do, or write, till tea. I always take the precaution, after strolling out of sight, to pelt away round to the other side of the house, or back on my own tracks, so as to baffle pursuit in case Nibbs should come crawling after me, as I feel sure she did on one occasion.

There is a mystery about this young lady. All I can gather is that "She is not very happy at home." I can quite understand that. She would certainly not be happy in any home of mine. She appears to have no special grounds of intimacy with the Grahams. She condescends to them, and seems to try on all occasions to point her own superiority in social experience, cultivated tastes, dress, and personal attractions. They must be extremely good-natured girls, for when there are visitors here "Nibby dear," as they call her, lays herself out to attract and hold attention to the exclusion of everyone else, by dressing conspicuously and making conversation in a high throaty voice about art, and music, and old lace, and old bungalorum. It is only on these occasions that she takes much notice of her little dog. She carries him about with her, holds him against her face, and, at tea, makes him go through all his tricks. Yesterday, when the Wyndacottes and others came in to tennis, "Baby," however, would not do his tricks properly. By tomorrow he will not do them at all,



I hope, for I am privately *unteaching* him. I tell him to lie dead and repeatedly stir him up with my foot until he refuses to obey and gets the bit of sugar; or I tell him to sit up and keep on pushing him over until he becomes sulky and won't, and is rewarded. It requires patience, but I have plenty to spare in the interests of these topping young women in comparison with whom little Nibbs is absolute rubbish.

I have decided to try an "Airy Nothing for the Ball-room" on Nibbs. Nita's letter has reminded me of *Social Deportment*, and I have been looking at it. There may be something in what the author says after all. I certainly do not make much way with the girls here. There seems to be a sort of crust I can't get through. I do not feel in the least that I am getting into her confidence. There are pauses between us sometimes when I have to think what to say to her next—to Rachel, I mean. I want to know more about her, and she behaves as if there were not any more about her; in fact, we got on much better in the first days of my visit when there seemed to be none of these reserves. You can't help thinking of her and wondering about her. There is something fascinating in the composed air of her broad, swift motions—I can't describe it—and the way her shoulder slopes away just by her neck, and all sorts of other things too. She is quite different from anyone else and you can't forget her. I feel it may be my own fault that we don't get on better, and so I am going to try an "Airy Nothing" on Nibbs, just as a test, and

to see if I can do it right. If she does not respond I shall not mind, and no harm will be done. If it goes off well I shall feel justified in feeling my way to something of the same kind with Rachel.

Although little Nibbs is, as I have said, such a little horror, she contributes in some degree to my entertainment here, for it is quite good fun laying plans to let her down heavily when she deserves it—which is forty times a day. It is a tame business certainly, but it becomes quite absorbing when one gives one's mind to it, and helps to fill in the time and make things pleasant.

For instance, last night, when there was no one dining here and we spent a quiet evening, Nibbs, (who was ostentatiously making notes from a large volume brought from the library,) feeling that she was not being observed, said across the room to Rachel:

"It says here that the real old Blue Nankin was not made in Nankin at all; I never knew that. Isn't it interesting?"

"Very, Nibby dear," said Rachel.

Rachel does not care about Blue Nankin, or Red Yankow, or Green Meeow, or Yellow Bow-wow-wow, any more than Nibbs does. Nibbs only pretends these things in order to shine. I have seen her sitting apart and admiring a miniature with an eye alert to note whether the movements of her pretty little neck—which I should like to clip through with the garden shears—was being observed. Her admiration of the

miniature was entirely due to a rather fanciful low lace collar she was wearing.

Soon after, she went to the piano and began to play Grieg's *Wedding March* so softly as to be hardly audible, till at last Rachel said, "Do play it, dear," and we had it for the third time that day. It is her show piece. She does not seem to care to play anything else. She plays it with a terrible facility, in which the pedal is put down to cover up the untidy places. After she had played "Grigg's dance," as I call it, twice, she suddenly got up, with an exclamation that made Mrs. Graham look round and held the attention of us all.

"Oh, do let's play a game of week-ends!"

Rachel good-humoredly put down her book; Maude and Valerie did not seem to find their game of Halma interesting; and Mrs. Graham's letters could apparently wait quite well; so we sat down with pencils and bits of paper to gratify Nibbs by making a list, in three minutes by my watch, of as many things as we could think of beginning with "T" that we might take away on a week-end visit.

Nibbs is always springing brainy little games on us, because she rather excels at them. She wanted taking down again.

When "time's up" was declared, I had only eleven words, which was but half the number on any other list. Nibbs, of course, had the most. Each in turn read out the words on her list, and if anyone else had the same word, that word was struck out

by everyone. "Trunk," "Toilet Case," "Ticket," etc. etc., however, did not affect me, and I still had my eleven words intact when my turn came, last of all, to read out the things I might take away with me on a week-end visit. The first was "Typhoid Fever."

This led to a discussion. Nibbs said it was not a fair word. Why not? Typhoid Fever was quite a likely thing to take away on a week-end visit, I contended. It must have actually happened over and over again. You might not know you had it on you. A week-end visitor was much more likely to bring Typhoid to a house than a Tambourine, which was one of the words Nibbs had scored with.

In the end, Typhoid Fever was allowed, and the road was clear for:

"Toothache, Trichinosis, Thrush, Typhus, Tonsillitis, and Tetanus." Next I offered "Tagarosis."

Nibbs questioned this last.

"Tagarosis," I repeated, in a tone of mild reproach. "You've heard of 'Tagarosis'?"

The Grahams had not, but little Nibbs exclaimed: "Oh, certainly; how forgetful I am." So I scored it. "Tozopethisis."

Nibbs swallowed this, too, when I had suggested that she probably knew the disease by its more common name of "Remps."

And so on. Final score—Nibbs eight, me eleven. Down goes Nibbs, "and so to bed," as the diarists say.

## CHAPTER VII

### I EXPLAIN TO RACHEL

**M**RS. GRAHAM'S confidences on the subject of her butler have led me to take an interest in one of the footmen, who, in the afternoon, wears powder and black satin breeches, and swags, knots, and tassels of silken cord slung across his chest. He wears powder, too, when he goes out with the carriage to help Mrs. Graham, Castor, and Pollux distribute visiting cards. From childhood there has always, for me, been a glamor over the powdered footman, and I asked the poor chap how he did it. Instead of crushed pearls supported in ambergris and maccassar oil, I find that the dignity of the Graham family is upheld, and a wholesome chill struck to the hearts of unwelcome callers, with nothing more than flour and soap. It seemed to me that oswego, or even ground rice or semolina, would be more impressive, but Wilfred said he had not tried them. He answered my question so seriously that I did not follow up my idea of bribing him to dress himself with tapioca pudding, to see how Mrs. Graham would

take it. Thinking I was interested in the subject, the poor fellow surprised me by returning with "those tools of his trade" which cannot be seized to satisfy a debt, namely, a very old hair-brush; a bar of yellow soap much used up; and a large tin flour-dredger. You wet the brush and damp your hair, and alternately brush the soap and your head till there is a certain quantity of soap in your hair, and—as I observed—a certain quantity of hair on the soap. You then spread a newspaper on the floor, robe yourself in towels, stop your ears, and turn on the flour without stint. Wilfred, however, tells me it is not correct to dress the eyebrows or eyelashes. When you have knocked your head once or twice against the wall, you are ready to open the front door, always provided that if you trip on the stairs, or sneeze, you must get someone to brush you down. It is very easy, it seems, for a powdered footman to be too much powdered.

Mrs. Graham is accustomed to make considerable sacrifices in the cause of dignity, and her daughters have been taught better than to interfere. One afternoon at tea there was a flutter among the girls, and Valerie got very pink. Mrs. Graham took command at once and rang the bell. It appeared that there was a wasp in the room and Valerie "does not like wasps." Her sisters respect that dislike, and Valerie has grown up to feel that she would not be doing what was expected of her if she allowed a wasp in the room without showing feeling. Mrs. Graham rang

the bell a second time, falling back in her chair after the violence of the attack, and when Bates opened the door the bell could be faintly heard pealing in the distance. Bates, being informed of the trouble advanced to the wrong window; was directed by Mrs. Graham to the right one; and made a thorough inspection of the wasp hurrying up and tumbling down the pane. He appeared to be satisfied for he made no comment, and withdrew. Three minutes later Mrs. Graham again rang the bell. Bates entered as though he had been awaiting the signal and held the door for the entrance of another person. This proved to be the second footman with a napkin. Bates closed the door and led the way to the window; the footman adroitly smothered the wasp in the napkin, and, escorted by Bates, who opened the door and went out after him, carried it from the room. The whole thing took about seven minutes. A practical man would have dabbed a bit of bread and butter over the wasp and then thrown it out on the path for someone to carry away on his boot, in twenty seconds.

There is a strapping great chap here known to the Grahams as Edgar Druce, a brother of the Druce girls who live at the next place and inundate Hildon from time to time. He is Captain in an Indian Regiment and has just arrived home on leave. The Grahams seem to have caught the enthusiasm of the sisters for their brother, for, so far as I can discover, the special merit in the man appears to lie in the fact that he once killed a tiger. After seeing him,

I can imagine that Edgar trod on the unlucky tiger. He is an enormous man, six foot five or thereabouts, with flanks like a bullock. Valerie says he is a "magnificent lawn-tennis player." Oh, is he! We will try that. This morning I found that Rachel had arranged to take him over the five holes. They asked me to join, but it would have been a three-cornered affair so I backed out. I know what the result will be: he will put Rachel wrong and undo all my work. She was just getting nicely into my swing.

When they moved off I turned, and was confronted by little Nibbs smiling at me archly with her head on one side, and asking whether I was going to take the boat out. The Grahams never use the boat, and I had accepted this idea from Nibbs on a previous occasion, so she went to "get ready," stepping daintily on to the sill of the open window and flashing a glance over her shoulder to see whether I was looking at her. Ten minutes later she joined me, having decorated herself in various subtle ways, and with a dashing hat, a green silk parasol, and a sort of cloak affair lined with crimson satin, which she handed to me to carry for her.

We procured the key of the boathouse and found the boat half full of water with a dead bat floating. We got things cleared up, however, and rugs fetched from the house, and at last little Nibbs was enthroned with her fineries in the stern and I was paddling past the serpentine banks loaded with



rhododendrons upon which a few blooms still lingered. My passenger took off one of her gloves and watched her jeweled fingers trailing in the water, glancing up at me with a little self-conscious smile, from time to time.

Conversation flagged. Nibbs has no small-talk. She cannot play. There is an undercurrent of meaning running through her talk which one soon becomes quick to recognize, and almost everything she says either detracts from others by condescending to them, or directly implies her own superiority.

"This is a very quiet house, isn't it, Mr. Quinn?" she said after a pause.

"Yes. Don't you like it?"

"Oh yes. It's delightful—so restful; one can recuperate and start again like a giant refreshed after a visit here."

No comment.

"I am rather sorry for the Grahams—the girls I mean; they must feel rather out of it sometimes."

No comment.

"What a pity it is Valerie does not dress better, Mr. Quinn; such a pretty girl if she were not quite so lumpish. *Dear* old Valerie, I am devoted to her; she is so simple! Like an affectionate old dog, a perfect dear, isn't she?"

"The Grahams are old friends of mine," I said. "It is a little difficult for me to discuss them."

The young lady continued to smile at the water rippling against her fingers. After a pause she said:

"What is your favorite book, Mr. Quinn?" Then she added, "My favorite is Browning, *The Ring and the Book*; it used to be Shakespeare—but not now; what's yours?"

"*How to be Happy though Married*," I said at a venture.

This seemed to take little Nibbs from a new direction. She said nothing for a time. Then the little wretch began:

"Don't you think 'Rachel' a very pretty name, Mr. Quinn? I do. Very."

This was said to the fingers. I did not reply at once and she looked up with smiling eyes in which I thought I could see a malicious purpose. It was more than I could stand. I am not ashamed of admiring Rachel, but to have this little terror——

I began to feel my way in order to lead her into labyrinths where she would lose herself.

"I never think of names as being pretty or otherwise," I answered.

"Why?"

"Because I am susceptible. If I thought of how pretty names are, I should not know where to stop. Placed as I am, I can't face the racket. I have to go piano."

"How do you mean? How are you placed?"

Nibb's mouth was open below her little short lip. She gazed at me with eager interest. The bow of the boat slid under a mass of blossoms and grounded.

I shipped the oars and crawled aft, and sat beside her. She moved to make room for me.

"I am cooked," I said gravely, looking at the pearl set in brilliants that swung from her ear and trembled against her neck. Her hat was cocked up with a bow under it on my side, and the view before me could well bear close inspection. Her little bones are all so shapely, and there is a faint down on her cheek. I could follow the perky little jut of her chin. It was damnable. I could have drowned her.

She looked slowly round with parted lips and a serious question in her face. Her eyes met mine at a range of six inches, and she shut up her mouth and turned away her head.

"I don't quite understand you," she said with a faint smile, fanning her hand about to dry it.

"I have never before breathed the story, but I am in a horrible fix," I said. "It's a terrible stew. I can rely on you to respect my confidence, I am sure."

She nodded eagerly and glanced round at me.

"You might show me a way out."

"Yes. Quite likely I might. Oh, do tell me."

"Once," I whispered to her, "and only once, I popped it."

"You *what*? Popped it?"

"Yes. Popped it to a dear lady—how dear that lady was I need not say. I wrote to her—no matter what I said—I asked her hand."

"Well?"

"She hasn't replied."

"When did you write?"

"Rather more than two years ago."

"Two years! And you haven't seen her since!"

"Oh lor, yes; lots of times."

"Didn't you ask her whether she got your letter?"

"Good gracious! *No*; of course not."

"But why not?"

"Why not! Don't you realize that if I did she would want to know what was in it."

"But that would be all right. If she never received it you could write again."

"Oh! I see now what you mean, but I changed my mind. I regretted the letter, of course, the moment I had posted it."

Little Nibbs became thoughtful. Her face has not a very pleasant expression when you catch it with the mask off. After a pause, she said:

"Either she never got the letter at all, or she must have ignored it in order to give you a snub. I don't see how you are in a fix, as you don't now feel——"

"My difficulty is that I am absolutely cooked."

"But how? It's all over."

"No. It's only beginning. You must understand that, though I dare not ask her outright, I can tell quite well by the way she talks that she has never got my letter."

"Well, then, it's quite all right."

"No; it's quite all wrong. She may get the letter any day."

"But it's lost."

"Possibly. But I posted it myself. It went into the Post Office all right, but it has never come out. They don't call it lost. The Post Office never loses a letter. They call it 'delayed in delivery.' It has slipped down a crack, or a postman put it inside the lining of his helmet to make it fit, and has forgotten. Didn't you see in the paper yesterday that someone had received with his morning's letters a card that was posted eleven years ago?"

"Did you write to the Post Office people?"

"Yes."

"Did they answer?"

"By return."

"What did they say?"

"'Dear Sir or Madam.—We have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of the 15th inst., which is receiving attention.'"

"Was that all?"

"No; I wrote again."

"What did they say then?"

"'Dear Sir or Madam.—We have the honor to acknowledge your communication of the 29th inst., which is receiving attention.'"

"Did you never hear any more?"

"About two months afterwards they wrote saying that they had been quite unable to trace my letter, and thought that I must have been mistaken in thinking I posted it?"

"And that was all?"

"That was all."

"But, even now, I don't see——"

"How I'm cooked? Well, I cannot go back on my solemn plighted word. If in years to come that letter is delivered, I must make good. I can't possibly back out. And if after, say, seven years, I presumed the letter to be destroyed, and put an advertisement in *The Times* disclaiming all letters posted more than seven years ago and not delivered, how could I even then approach the idea of marriage? How could I tell the lady of my choice, when I declared myself, that a proposal of marriage from me might at that very moment be under the consideration of another."

Little Nibbs was pensive and smiling.

"And you say you are susceptible, Mr. Quinn?"

I took my chance of an "Airy Nothing for the Ball-room."

"I do. I envy that little bow perched so daintily against your hair close to that shell-like ear. What secrets would I not whisper were I so near. Oh, happy, happy little bow!"

"Oh, Mr. Quinn, how can you be so ridiculous?" She wriggled.

"No, that's not right—I mean—er—you are very kind to me and anticipate my feelings—er—exactly—I mean I am—I have not found my wings as yet. I am only a wretched caterpillar, don't you know."

It did not fit in properly, but little Nibbs was delighted, and laughed, and put her hand over her ear, and said how absurd I was, and appeared to be in-

viting more remarks of the same kind, when she suddenly glanced up, seemed to recover herself, and then began waving her handkerchief.

I do not know whether she did this to save her face or to attract the attention of Rachel so that she might notice our romantic situation, wedged up together in the narrow boat among the blazing blossoms. It was Rachel she was signalling to, however. She and Captain Druce had come into view. I was glad that I had time to get to the oars and push the boat out before they saw us, and I made an excuse to land Miss Nibbs before I took the boat in.

A very little of Nibbs goes a long way with me.

I have decided to clear out. I've had enough of Hildon. It came upon me at breakfast this morning that I would like a change, so I told Mrs. Graham that I should have to go tomorrow—so many visits to pay, etc. etc. Mrs. Graham has been kindness itself; I have really enjoyed my fortnight here. She said she hoped I would come again. I will certainly think it over. I don't feel capable of arriving at a decision just at present. It would be like ordering tomorrow's dinner while cracking the nuts of today's, and that is true in more ways than one, for there is a nut for me to crack before I go.

The fact of the matter is, I have had a mix-up with Rachel. I can't go until I have patched up some sort of understanding with her, or it might spoil my holiday. I haven't the least idea what she thinks of me, and I should like to throw *Society Depart-*

*ment* at Nita's wicked head. I have just noticed that my copy is the seventh edition and that it is dated thirty-six years ago, but even so the flunkey who wrote it ought to be dug up and boiled. I can't think how I came to make such an ass of myself. After the way Nibbs wallowed in the "Airy Nothing for the Ballroom" I thought I might venture something of the same sort with Rachel, but I should have known that it was not the sort of joke she would care about—though in point of fact it was not altogether a joke, and I thought at the time I was doing it extremely well. You see, I think a tremendous lot of Rachel. She really is a charming little thing. I never meant any harm, yet I feel like a whipped man, and I can do nothing but hang about for a chance of a quiet talk with her. She avoids me and will not let me catch her alone. I was on the prowl all yesterday afternoon, and the whole of this morning, and Mrs. Graham noticed it and sent out Bates to me with a bit of cotton-wool and a bottle of Mumby's Pain Killer. She thought I'd got toothache. Damn!

It happened yesterday morning, but it seems like a week ago. I had been showing her how to throw a fly. There are no trout in the pool, but there are plenty of small rudd that rise freely, and Rachel has a light wrist for them. We had been having a good deal of fun, and she was standing with her plump brown fingers trying to knot her cast, and I was looking on over her shoulder, when I said it.



There was no sort of harm in it. The worst anyone could say would be that it was idiotic, or that it was so insincere as to be quite the reverse of complimentary. It was not altogether insincere, but what sticks in my gizzard is that she should suppose that I don't know better than to say things like that.

She did not make any sign of having heard me for a moment, except that she got a little pink. Then she suddenly looked round and cried "Yes, Maud?" and listened as though she had heard her sister calling her. The next instant she put the line quickly into my hand and ran away to the house, and it's the end of my comradeship with Rachel. I can see that.

I hardly knew what had happened till she did not come back, but at lunch I was able to realize the extent of the damage. Instead of sitting quiet and observant and chipping in, as is her wont, she kept up a low-toned conversation with her sisters. I tried to get her to look at me, but she wouldn't. When I addressed her and compelled an answer I got a short one, and it was "Mr. Quinn" this, and "Mr. Quinn" the other, and her eyes were all screwed up into the queer defensive smile with which she greets strangers.

In the afternoon she was always somewhere out of sight except while I was playing tennis. I had a five-set match with Captain Druce, and she came out and looked on for a time. I did my best to take down his colors, but he fairly beat me; in fact, I only scored one set, and that one the first. He got up

to the net and returned everything. It was like trying to pass the revolving blades of an aeroplane propellor. I can well believe in any number of tigers now. Killing tigers is an easy job compared with killing my drives down the side lines. He made me look perfectly helpless, and of course Rachel will not guess what a deadly hand he is. Oh well, this time tomorrow I shall be miles away.

There seemed to be a subdued air oppressing the party, as though I were a naughty boy, or else I imagined it, for my tail was certainly down yesterday. Sir Evelyn Wyndacotte and his daughter dined here, and it was even a little dull. Nibbs, of course, was all over the place, stuck about with jewels and rustling very much, and apparently trying her best to displace Beatrice Wyndacotte in the esteem of her own father. The old boy evidently thinks I am here, on the matrimonial lay. As we sat over cigarettes in the dining-room, he commended Mrs. Graham for her "capacity and pluck," and praised the girls for being so "sensible." I don't know exactly what he means. Why shouldn't they be sensible? Of course they are! Then he went on to tell me gravely—as though he suspected I was not sound on the subject—that Maud would make any man a "splendid wife." Of course I assented, though it was a new idea to me. I had given the matter no thought whatever. I never bother my head about what sort of wife any particular girl will make someone else whom I don't know.

"Eh?" queried Sir Evelyn. He is a little deaf.

"Yes, certainly. I quite agree with you, sir," I told him again.

"A most excellent wife," he repeated. "The fellow who gets her will be a lucky man."

Of course old Maud's all right, I know that, but I don't see why he should rub it into me that she is "sensible" and will make an "excellent wife." When I get a wife, if I ever do, I want to feel sure she will be a real snorter, so that we can kick up our heels together and have a good time. I cannot endure the thought of my wife crying over the grocer's book—and all really "excellent" wives do that sometimes. No; the very last thing I should hope for is to be included in Sir Evelyn Wyndacotte's list of "lucky men." I want to go on being, in his estimation, an unlucky one—"miserable dog" is, I believe, the accepted term. Well, I want to remain a "miserable dog." Hurrah for the "miserable dogs"! We are a happy family,—and so say all of us.

I don't often break into song like this. I'm getting a bit above myself, I think. I cannot forget that my favorite "dog," among all the miserable ones, will take the road tomorrow along o' Susan, who is all the wife he wants.

I have had it out with Rachel, more or less, and it's all quite right—or nearly so—so far as I can see, I mean. She is a little tramp, of course, but one is apt to forget she is scarcely more than a child in some ways. She is so independent, competent, and

generally self-contained that one instinctively regards her as a woman, and, in a sense, one's equal. But she is not, and I realized this when I came to tackle the business, and it made it difficult, and somehow I did not put things as clearly as I had intended. I wanted her to understand that I could appreciate her feelings, and that she was not to suppose I was the sort of chap who said such things.

As Rachel generally appears at breakfast through the window with her hat on, I got down early this morning to resume my prowling, but I could not find her. The letters were brought in as we were at table, and my share was another picture postcard from Bat—at least, I cannot imagine who else would send them. This time the subject was Miss Bertie Farlow, a large fluffy beauty with very showy Jewish nostrils, bilious eyes, and a secretive smile. I slipped the card into my pocket directly I saw what it was, but Rachel was passing behind my chair at the moment and I think she must have had a glimpse of it. She disappeared after breakfast, and soon I caught sight of a distant object flashing across between the trees, and had to realize that Ham was racing off with his mistress by the South Lodge.

It was not till the afternoon that I came upon Rachel. I was nursing my toothache, as Mrs. Graham would have supposed, when I fairly caught her in a remote arbor, reading.

"I wanted to find you, to tell you how annoyed I am," I said at once, confronting her.

"About yesterday?" she asked simply, looking up at me with shoulders stooping over the book on her knees.

"Yes. What you must think of me I don't know, but I want to tell you that I am not at all that sort of chap. No one ever heard me say a thing like that before—except, of course, in joke," I added, as I remembered Nibbs in the boat.

"I thought you meant it as a joke," said Rachel. She was sitting up now, with her eyes wandering over the ground. While I spoke she stooped and picked up a pea blossom which had fallen from a handful on the seat beside her.

"Yes, exactly; so it was a joke, in a sense; but I don't make jokes like that to girls like you. It makes me feel a cad. I could not possibly go away without explaining things, it would absolutely ruin my holiday."

"Oh, don't say that."

"It would indeed. I am not exaggerating. My holiday would be spoilt. I think you are simply splendid, and I should hate to go away and feel I had given you a bad impression of me; it would make me feel dreary, because I am not at all the sort of fellow you think."

"It's all right. I don't mind. I only thought it a little odd."

She was fingering the pages of her book now, with her head bowed so that I could not see her face.

"Odd!" I said. "I don't know that I should call

it exactly odd. 'Playful' is more the word I should choose—besides, I do mind very much. I hate upsets like this. I like everything to be cheerful and gay, and always lots of fun, especially now I am on a holiday. It gives me the blues, you know, when things go wrong, and I like to come to an understanding at once, and have it out, and put things right again. I want you to realize that I should simply hate to have things out of joint between us."

"Oh, that's all right, *please* don't think about it." She glanced up for a moment, smiling.

"But I do think of it, I want things to be as they were before I—before yesterday."

"Well, then, they are." She looked up.

"But are they?"

"Yes, of course." She smiled again. "You make too much of it."

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, in point of fact, it wasn't exactly a joke—not altogether; I meant it—in a sense, you understand. You see, it's like this—I have been reading a book—Well, it's difficult to explain, but, look here—do let me feel that everything is cleared up now."

"I agree," she said, glancing up with a smile.

It wasn't quite satisfactory, somehow, all the same.

"Well, then, shake," I said.

She gave me her hand at once, dry, soft, and warm, looking at me with her eyes shut up in that

inscrutable way I have got to know so well of late. There was a sort of glitter in them. What did that mean?

I did not intend to hold the hand, and I am not aware that I did so, but she certainly pulled it out of mine.

"What's the time?" she asked suddenly.

I told her it was twenty minutes past three, and she jumped up with a show of dismay. "I must go in," she said.

She walked rapidly, and talk flagged as we went up across the lawns. Then she suddenly ran on and slipped in through the dining-room window. It is characteristic of Rachel to pop in and out everywhere all day, like a little animal.

Now, when at the beginning of my explanation I said, "No one ever heard me say a thing like that before," Rachel, who was looking at me, suddenly cast down her eyes. It flashed upon me that Nibbs had been letting on. I wonder! It would be just like her.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SUSAN LETS ME DOWN

**I**T rained the morning I left Hildon to join Aunt Elizabeth at Rork's Drift, but the sky was clearing as, with Susan pumping away at the front door, I said goodbye. The ladies, with the exception of Rachel, came to the door to see me off. Nibbs was smilingly to the fore; Bates ministered with unnecessary services in the van; and the two footmen and the midshipmen loomed dejectedly in the background. "Where is Rachel?" Mrs. Graham asked; but Rachel was not to be seen, and I felt pipped as Susan slogged heavily down the drive with a bad attack of dirty commutator. However, when the West Lodge came into view there was Rachel, sure enough, waiting for me, and she held the gate open. She had evidently planned to say goodbye in seclusion, so to speak, but I don't understand how she knew that I would leave by the West Lodge. It was quick-witted of her. My route lay by the South Lodge, but they had been mending the high road beyond so I decided to go round, and Rachel



had thought it all out, and there she was. She seemed a little embarrassed. I could understand that she did not quite trust herself to say goodby under the eye of her mother and Nibbs. It was a delicacy of feeling that appealed to me. I cannot quite describe it, but I felt flattered. I admire Rachel, and after our little turn-up—in fact I admire her tremendously. She had her golf clubs, so she must have come right across the park to see me. I pulled off my glove to shake hands, but she was behind the gate holding it with one hand and her golf clubs with the other, so that she could not very well respond. There was nothing particular to say, and I felt that the idea of my going caused her regret which she was too shy to avow, and this naturally led to constraint in her manner. She pretended to look radiant, but I could not see her eyes. And so we parted.

She had on the turquoise stockings again. It is remarkable she should have known that I admire them; or possibly it was merely an instinctive sentiment that made her wish that I should see the last of her in the dress she had worn when we first began to know one another. If I were an artist I could touch off Rachel to the life as I saw her, the little ruddy brown creature, smiling at me through the bars of the gate. Just as I said goodby I caught sight of a man who sometimes carried for her standing with another bag, so I suppose she was going round with him, though I had no idea he knew the game. I was tempted to stop for an hour and take

her on myself, but I had a long journey before me, Susan was out of sorts, and I was late. I have pretty well decided to go to Hildon again before my holiday comes to an end. Mrs. Graham evidently wished me to understand that I should be welcomed.

As I passed the Druce's gate, Captain Druce was hurrying out. He was absorbed, thinking of tigers I suppose, and rather started when I cheered to him.

I don't know what's coming to Susan. She behaved like a mule that day. I felt inclined more than once to get out and kick her. It was while I was searching myself all over for something which would cure Susan that I found a sovereign in my ticket-pocket, and realized that I had tipped Bates with a lead counter I use for putting into the butt of a fly rod to balance it. The odd thing is that I think Bates must have known what he had got, for he certainly appeared to glance at it, and I tried to catch a sign of gratification in his slab of a face. Perhaps he thought it was a talisman and did not wish to show enthusiasm until he had tested its powers.

Mrs. Graham and the rest were ranged to perfection, banked up one above the other on the front steps, for a clear view of my tipping Bates. I tried to get him to come round to the far side of Susan, so that we should be partly screened from view, but the donkey would not tumble to it. It was a very awkward job, and all the time I had to keep up a rally of chaffing talk with the ladies. I think they

might well have pointed out objects in the sky to one another or found some other excuse to relinquish, for a moment, their concentrated gaze, for they must have seen what I was about. I tried to manoeuvre so as to place Bates between them and me, but he thought he was getting in the way, and we did a kind of dance together and "set to partners" on the gravel before I was able secretly to palm the counter and push my hand into his waistcoat and make him catch hold of the thing. I must send him a postal order.

A *Guide to Tipping* would be a most useful handbook. The only rule I know is "a bob a day for the house-servants, with a shilling under the doormat for the cook"; but this will not work, and I never put anything under the mat for the cook because I should be tortured with the uncertainty of her finding it;—unless I felt she was looking on from some secret hiding-place ready to pounce directly I retired, and then I should have to go into hiding myself and watch the mat to make sure she got the money. I cannot, however, face the risk of being caught by my hostess playing "peep-a-bo" with the cook.

I never understand the attitude of the master towards the tipping of his servants. I should be taken aback if my host said to me: "How much did you give the footman just now?" and yet he certainly can't be indifferent. He must either be gratified to know that his footman is getting extraneous nourishment which will hearten him for his job, or

he will dislike the idea that the hospitality he extends to his friends costs them in tips nearly as much as the amount of their bills at a hotel. I am always ill at ease when I become aware that my host knows I am in the act of tipping his servants, for I know that the reasons which prompt me are not such as I would care to confide to him. Take the case of the butler. In the first place, there is the wish not to be under obligations to the poor man. One's feeling of gratitude to the butler must be changed to a sense of gratitude due *from* the butler. That is certainly not a generous sentiment. In the second place, there is the desire to relieve the sedate mournfulness of the butler's life and reconcile him to the obscurity in which he exists. The obscurity of a butler affects me like that of a mole. It distresses me to see one, for a moment, *outside* a house. It looks foolhardy. My idea of a butler is a man who does not possess a hat. The modern youthful butler is a different thing, he has an air of being superior to his job; but the thoroughgoing old-fashioned butler who gives one the impression of being a butler because he has been one too long to even think of leaving off, quickens my compassion, though I dare not let my host know it.

The third impulse to tip the man could least of all be confided to his master. It arises from the circumstances that, quite to enjoy a visit to any house, it is necessary to feel sure that one has the approval of the butler. I may not care what my host thinks

of me, for perhaps I know that I am as good a man as he is; but I cannot endure the idea that his butler may have grounds for unfavorable criticism. I don't know any finer stimulus to polite conduct than to be up against a good butler. That man would never laugh loudly or use a slang expression. I watch the butler with a yearning eye. What does he think of me? A butler, alone of all men, even makes me feel a little ashamed of poor old Susan. I am aware that in tipping him I wish to give him the idea that I have a contempt for money, but part of the pleasure in giving a large tip is that it enables me, in some way I do not understand, to feel I am expressing contempt for the butler himself.

Aunt Elizabeth lives at Ludlow, so that there was a long run before us, and owing to Susan's ill-health and trouble with her tires, I had only got as far as Bromsgrove by half-past seven. I ordered dinner at the hotel and then went to the Post Office to wire to "Rork's Drift," so that they could air the sheets, as I did not expect to arrive before ten-thirty. I was told that it was doubtful whether the telegram would be delivered that night, but at any rate it would look polite when it turned up at breakfast, and Aunt Elizabeth likes people to be polite.

When I took the road again, however, the acetylene generator blew up, as it sometimes does. This led to delay, and I tried a short cut by a road which, though clearly shown on the map, proved difficult to follow. After stopping several times to read sign-

posts with a match burning my fingers, I got at last a clear direction. Aunt Elizabeth is a formidable person to face if one is late. She does not say much but there is an air of suppressed vivacity about her on those occasions which has always terrified me. I never feel sure that she will not hit me. I still believed I should just make "Rork's Drift" by eleven when Susan put on some of her frills and knocked the bottom out of the whole enterprise.

One of Susan's little ways is to balk on a stiff bank if the petrol is low; and she will not budge till you have filled up her tank. At the crest of a steep hill, in a wood, eight miles from Ludlow, she jibbed in this way. As the road was narrow I let her run back to its edge; and because the brakes were doubtful I took the precaution to lodge one wheel firmly against the bank. There was a strong camber to the road, and it had been also partly washed out at the side, and this cocked her up still more with the result that, when I had given her the emergency tin of petrol, I could get no response from her but a gasp and a back-fire. After working away with the starting-handle for some time, like an organ-grinder, I had to realize that I was fairly landed. I could not go uphill, and the bank prevented me from going down. Susan was fast. It was terrible to contemplate one who five minutes before had been full of power and courage, now lying silent and immovable. It was like gazing at a dead elephant.

While I was turning over what to do, a man in a

trap with a pretty woman beside him came down the hill. I asked where I could get petrol near by. "Nowhere!" Could he send anybody into Ludlow, or telephone? "No, he couldn't." He was quite friendly, but these were the facts. When I explained what was wrong, he said:

"If you want to raise the level of the petrol, you've only got to fill up the tank with stones."

The brilliance of this simple suggestion took me aback. I thanked him warmly. "Oh, don't mention it," he said, as he drove on.

I have since suspected that this man was Fred Yardley, the famous comedian. His face struck me as familiar at the time, and I now think it must have been he.

As I bustled to set about the job, I wondered why I had not at once hit on the idea myself. There were plenty of loose stones at the side of the road, but it occurred to me it might be a tiresome business getting them out again. Inspiration, however, haunts the night hours, and I saw that if I pushed a cloth down into the tank while holding the corners, and filled the stones into the bag so formed, I could afterwards draw up the cloth and bring the stones successively within reach of my fingers.

I selected one of Susan's medium wipes for this purpose. Susan's wipes are towels which my mother has "missed" and afterwards written off as "lost in the wash"; and a "medium wipe" is a towel which is about half-way through its career. Susan's wipes

begin as face-wipes, and their course is run when, as brake-wipes, they at last begin to put more grease on to the brakes than they take off. Wipes from fair to medium are graduated for various uses about her body, and ranking below these again come the engine and brake-wipes, for, one way and another, Susan takes a deal of wiping.

It was a pleasure dropping the first dozen stones in through the filling eye—I glowed with a sense of practical efficiency; but after the second dozen the task grew monotonous. It was troublesome selecting stones in the darkness of the wood, and before the third dozen had been posted I felt dreary and disheartened. I realized that bucketfuls of stones were wanted, and at the same time I became aware that the wipe was drawing out the petrol like a lampwick and that I was engaged in a race against evaporation. Haste was necessary. I kicked up stones, gravel, and dirt, and poured them into the tank; forced the mass fiercely down; and then, without hope, wound away at the starting-handle. Susan gave one thick, choking cough and showed no further signs of life.

There was nothing for it but to take the stones out. After fumbling in the dark I secured one small pebble. I got impatient over the second pebble, with the result that the wipe split, and the whole of the rubbish fell into the tank.

I may say here that many of the stones would only pass the opening at particular angles, and the man who next day had the job of getting them out



was obliged to remove the tank; turn it upside down; lie on his back underneath it and coax the stones out on to his face with special probes and forceps adapted to the various shapes of each. Every stone presented a new problem; and when, after two days, the job was finished, he possessed an outfit that would have provoked the envy of a dentist.

After one more futile attempt to wind up the engine, I sat down to reconsider the position. It was a quarter to twelve and a fine starlight night, and it did not take me long to decide to go to bed in Susan. I turned some the luggage on to the front seat, pulled down the hood, and curled up in a nest of overcoats.

The birds awoke me soon after three. I threw back the hood and languidly contemplated dawn breaking in the forest. It was rather wonderful. I had never had the experience before. It was as though there were a great mystery working in secret, and it was astonishing to think that this was happening every morning, and all day long, and through countless centuries. It suddenly struck me. "What did it all mean"? I asked myself "Why is a tree?" Then, "Why am I?" Susan seemed out of it, and yet in a sense she had life too. The air was fresh, and cool, and scented. The birds were all cheerful, and so was a mouse. Even the trees were happy too, and somehow I felt overcome. I was very hungry, and I suppose that is what was wrong with me.

Then I saw a man walking down the hill with a

milk-pail and a basket. He was a fine stocky little man. He might have been a little younger perhaps, but otherwise he was exactly the sort of man I wanted.

He told me he was a gardener. To explain the milk-pail and basket I had to imagine that he was a gardener on the track of his "perquisites" before anyone was about. He agreed to lend me a hand and we took the things out and, with a log of wood as a wheel-block, we got a good purchase on the bank with our feet, and inch by inch just managed to work Susan out-and-across the road. If I am ever the subject of a post-mortem examination in years to come, my friends must expect to be told that I have gone through life with a cockled heart, and I distinctly heard the gardener crack. I wound up Susan, packed in the luggage and toys, dropped the gardener and a florin at the bottom of the hill, and arrived at "Rork's Drift," all serene, at 4.20 a.m.

"Rork's Drift" is a "luxurious family residence with carriage drive approach, standing in its own grounds and surrounded by tastefully laid out gardens, comprising lawns, flower-beds, shrubberies, and noble forest trees," as the House Agent would say; but I prefer to describe it as an abject gabled villa partly redeemed by ivy and virginia creeper. There is a drive in and out enclosing shrubs which screen the front door from the road; and there is a rectangular strip of garden running along the hedge, with a

lawn big enough for curtailed croquet and a fine copper-beech at the bottom. The house was probably built at the time of the Zulu War, and was named by a speculative builder trained in the idea that to equip it for the market every villa must have the name of a bloody battle or a famous general painted on the gate.

I left Susan in the road, where I could keep an eye on her through the hedge, and went down the garden and made myself comfortable with my writing-pad on the seat under the copper-beech until such time as the house should be astir for breakfast. I sat in full view of the dining-room window, and I became interested to observe how, and by whom, I should be first recognized.

A clock had struck six before I noticed blinds drawn up and heard a door open somewhere, and, soon after, a black Cocker spaniel came rambling down the garden. Aunt Elizabeth does not keep dogs, but this was an old one, and he was nearly blind, as I could see by the way he blundered into the croquet hoops as he ranged over the lawn. One of the boys must have brought him. My heart warms to the Cocker more than to other dogs. He has no exaggerated ideas of the importance of rats, and no ambitions that are not proper to a gentleman. He appeals first as being a humble little dog and a grotesque one, but before you are aware of it you have discovered that his self-possession and doggy equipment are perfect, and that his beauty is a thing to

marvel at with ever-renewed wonder. His complete and utter blackness may seem a negative merit until you notice the perfection with which the curves and ripples of his coat are arranged to clothe his small, burly rotundities. I love his feathered paws, and his little clownish, tailor-made rump. I watched this one without making any sign. After a little he became aware of my presence, and approached me with his muzzle up until he stood and cautiously advanced his nose to within an inch of my leg. He was attentive for an instant and then started, as though he had been stung; pressed down his bit of tail; trundled off down the path with his ears turned inside-out; bustled round the corner of the house and was seen no more. It was not a generous welcome. It was as though I did not smell right.

Some time afterwards I noticed two maid-servants at the dining-room window, and shortly afterwards a third, and a few minutes later two maids and a figure in a pink dressing-gown were at the landing window. I kept my head well down, and waited for Aunt Elizabeth to open the window and call to me to know what business I had in her garden. She did not do so, however; but after further movements at the window and considerable delay, a young man in knickerbockers and dancing-pumps came down the garden. I did not allow myself to see more than his legs, and remained busy with my writing. He stopped five yards off, and then, to my astonishment, went quickly away again. A few seconds later a

strange young voice addressed me from a distance.

"I say, my mother says what do you want in our garden?"

I looked up and saw a weedy youth of washed-out appearance standing in sloppy clothes, his hair loaded with grease and brushed back off his forehead, a loose underlip, and eyes like a hen. His personality was so colorless that, as I recalled afterwards, it was I who led in expressing astonishment and in cross-questioning as to who the intruder was, and what explanation he had for being there. I gathered from him by severely pressing my questions that his name was Verscoyle, that he and his mother were living at "Rork's Drift," and that Aunt Elizabeth had let the house to them for three months and was herself at Bourncombe. When he had explained these things I told him something of myself. "Why don't you come closer," I said. "Are you afraid of me?"

He smiled weakly and approached and listened to me with a drooping lip. Just then Jelf, the occasional gardener, came on the scene, and he was able to confirm my identity. I asked the sawny to carry my apologies to his mother and shook his limp moist hand at the gate. Just as I had got Susan started, however, he came out and mumbled:

"I say, my mother says won't you come in and have some breakfast."

As this proposal accorded with the scheme of my tour, and my consent would go some way towards atoning for the disturbance I had occasioned, I ac-

cepted, and brought Susan in through the gate.

In the hall, my companion, in response to an admonitory voice went upstairs, and returning to me, said: "My mother says, would you like to change your things?"

I found breakfast on the table and Mrs. Verscoyle and her son gazing at the door when, half an hour later, I entered the dining-room. The lady was a tall, stylish-looking woman, with a strong cast in her right eye. Her face was otherwise rather handsome—the features were good; she would have looked well in a fireman's helmet. Her graying hair was strained back from her forehead and her skin was red and rough. She kept her lips compressed and oddly twisted to one side, and, as her cast favored the opposite direction, she looked as though she were offering a sour kiss to someone on the left with one eye swiveled round to make sure it was not under observation from the right. She spoke rapidly in a shrill, querulous voice that came oddly from such a stalwart frame, and cut short my apologies for intrusion with a cold inclination of her head. It was soon obvious to me that her sole reason for inviting me to breakfast was to complain to me about the house. She certainly was quite unconcerned as to whether I got anything to eat. They seemed to think they were feeding a canary. I have never been more hungry in my life, and there were three poached eggs in an entree dish: one for the sawny; one for me; and

the third, as I had to realize with bitter resentment, for "Mr. Manners," as we used to say in the nursery. There was nothing else to be got at except some chips of toast set like jewels in scraggy little toast-racks. It was partly light-headedness due to exhaustion, and partly the impossibility of thinking of anything but the unattainable poached egg chilling under the metal cover that, I suppose, led me to reply to Mrs. Verscoyle's insistent fretful comments on the house with any elusive nonsense that came into my head. The lady refused altogether to accept the idea that it was nothing to do with me. She seemed to feel that I was a relative of "Rork's Drift," and that an account of its defects would deservedly hurt me in the tender parts of my self-respect. First it was the bath.

"I am afraid you could get no hot water from the tap. The range won't heat the water at all. It's impossible to have a hot bath."

"Have you pulled out the damper?" I said. "That's the thing to do. Some cooks even throw them away."

"It's *always* out. If we push it in the range smokes," the mother said tartly, and the weed smiled and glanced at me with his lips pushed out flinchingly towards the hot edge of his cup.

"We are disappointed with the house. There is too much furniture and it harbors dust. Nice for my hay-fever! It must be very damp here in the winter. The house smells damp. We have dis-

covered a horrid smell in the cupboard under the stairs."

"Isn't it rather a mistake to *search* for smells?" I commented.

"We can't imagine what it can be," Mrs. Verscoyle complained.

"But as long as they stay in their cupboards, and don't come out" . . . I was continuing.

"We naturally want to know. It may be the drains, though I distinctly understood that the drains had been tested. I myself had the water thoroughly analyzed."

"Was it improved?"

My hostess looked at me as though I were a fool, instead of a man dying of hunger.

"The analysis looked dreadful, but the man said it was an average water and fairly safe for drinking purposes if carefully filtered."

"It's not so nourishing, of course, if you filter it."

"We *always* drink filtered water. We were astonished to notice how small the filter was here. We have had to hire a larger one, and some fire buckets. We are in terror of fire. There is no fire escape."

"Some people think them very dangerous things," I said. "I know a lady who left her hotel at ten o'clock at night because she had seen a fire escape."

Mrs. Verscoyle appeared to turn this over in her mind as she eyed me for a moment. Then she went on rapidly, "We cannot make the scullery tap stop



running and the floor is always splashed and wet in consequence. Charles saw a mouse."

Charles nodded to me gravely.

"Servants take them about with them in their boxes," I explained.

"Good gracious! I am sure none of my servants would do a thing like that."

"It's not the servants who do it; it's the mice," I told her. "They climb in after the candles and groceries."

Mrs. Verscoyle looked at the teapot and moved a little in her chair, then she seemed to recollect herself.

"I never saw anything, anywhere, to equal the flies in the kitchen."

"When Sir Edmund Wilson was alive," I told her, "he would not allow a fly in his kitchen. The result was there were no spiders, consequently no cobwebs."

"How did he keep them out, pray?"

"With a Maltese cook."

"But I don't understand."

"Maltese thoroughly understand flies," I explained, "and Sir Edmund thoroughly understood Maltese. He told his cook that if he ever found a fly in the kitchen he would make him swallow it."

All this time I was doing the best I could for myself. I did not dally with the viands. I ate the cargo of a special rack of toast almost before the servant who brought it had left the room. I couldn't

help it. I saw two bananas in a plate on the side-board. It was awful. I gave my hostess the earliest opportunity of rising.

As we passed towards the hall, the lady suddenly opened a door and said:

"This is the smell I spoke to you about, Mr. Quinn!"

It was the first time I had ever been formally introduced to a smell. I would describe this one as a tall pink smell, probably a mixture of naphthalin and goloshes.

"Surely it's a bad smell?" she complained.

"That entirely depends on whether you like it or not," I said.

"We don't like it at all. It can't be wholesome. I must do something."

"It's not my smell," I told her. "It belongs to Lady Wilson. She may value it, and if you interfere with it you may spoil it."

Exactly an hour later I stretched myself on the lounge in the entrance hall of the Three Feathers. My complaint was so obvious that everyone who went in or out of the hotel gazed at me and smiled lingeringly. I was absolutely prostrated with bliss. I had had breakfast.

When I sat down I told the waiter I wanted one double-breakfast. Mrs. Verscoyle's breakfast had provoked my hunger to such a pitch that I was almost

in tears. My performance was, I feel, worthy of record:—

### QUINN'S DOUBLE BREAKFAST

THREE FEATHERS, LUDLOW, *July 29th.*

Bacon and (2) eggs.

Tea—toast.

Cold beef and ham, while awaiting the  
appearance of:—

Bacon and (2) eggs.

Another teapot and toast.

Cold ham.

Another go of cold ham.

Bread, butter, marmalade, etc.

## CHAPTER IX

### MR. BERT SUTHERLAND BOUNDS INTO THE ARENA

**I**T is a week since I last wrote. I am sitting in the sun on the beach at Bourncombe with a near view of the white cliffs and brown seaweed of Shelly Head. Nita is a little way below me to the left, with a towel over her shoulders and her russet hair spread out to dry. I have told her that I object to these outrages on the privacy of the toilet. She is reading, I think, and every now and then a pebble falls on the beach near her (one did just then), and she glances about dubiously as though she suspected someone was throwing stones at her. It can't possibly be me, for Nita can see, when she looks round, that I am writing. The most guilty-looking person is an old gentleman who is lying on the beach idly playing "knuckle bones" with some pebbles. He has begun to notice that Nita keeps glancing round at him. Oh, it's a pleasant life!

Ferdinand and his "fiance" (as they call it in America) are "somewhere about." They are always "somewhere about." Aunt Elizabeth has made herself comfortable on a camp stool under a groin, in a

shady black hat with a scrap of white in it, for the dear old thing always keeps the flag flying. At this moment she is looking up from her book and regarding the approach of a monkey in a red frock with severe disapproval. If the monkey is as dirty as the boy with the accordion appears to be, I can sympathize with her. The old lady always insists on looking after herself and is equal to all occasions. At a few words from her the boy jerks the monkey—who has a wary hand on his lead to prevent his head being pulled off—to his shoulder, and turns away; on which Aunt Elizabeth relents and gets out her purse and, still warning him, sternly throws twopence to the winds, and then is dreadfully concerned lest he should not find both coins, and is actually getting out another penny when the boy makes good, and grins, and touches his hat.

Yes, it's a pleasant life here in the sun; one's skin tingling after a bath; the cool air invading one, all over, through thin flannels; no cares, and with a good hairbrush and a buck lunch to look forward to in an hour's time. Since I came to Bourncombe I have discovered that I am an eupeptic: before I have finished one meal I am thinking of the next.

Aunt Elizabeth has a charming little house in the old town, with a shady walled garden from which, over a neighboring orchard, one looks out on the swelling bosom of the South Downs. A blank gable of the house flanks the road, and you enter through a postern in the garden wall which opens magically

to the visitors by virtue of a wire operated in the front hall.

Aunt E. pretended to be slightly rumpled and made little complaining noises on coming home to dinner and finding Susan piled with luggage in the street outside and me in the garden with the *Morning Post*. The whole party had been out picnicking, and the first notice I had of their arrival was Aunt Elizabeth's voice without, asking in stern tones of the world at large, "Why is that car standing out here?"

Nita greeted me in rather an off-hand manner I thought, and she said airily to Miss Hornby, Ferdinand's *fiancée*, whom I had never seen before, "This is Thomas," and then laughed. The young lady greeted me in a particular way with a warm handshake, as though she were welcoming me, instead of allowing me, as a member of the family she was marrying into, to welcome her. It is evident that Nita has been talking about me to Myra. I wonder what she has been saying! Myra is all right, however. She is really a capital sort. She is a tall, strapping young woman, dark, with a wide mouth and an engaging grin, and a fine open face and large, glowing brown eyes under thick wide brows. She dresses in rather a flowery style, so that at first shock she appears a dazzler and rather takes one's breath away; but one soon realizes that her beauty is of a homely kind, and she really is capital company. Her slow, mirthful contralto tones, and her calm deep-bosomed laugh, give a quality to the company. One misses

her at once when she is out of the room. Ferdinand seems rather overawed, as if he were not yet used to having achieved Myra. He is reserved and pre-occupied, and is not half the good fellow he used to be. I can't get him for golf or tennis; he spends his time hanging about: in fact he is making rather an ass of himself, I think. Nita seems to have become like a sister of Myra, although they only met a fortnight ago. They are continually to be seen twined together, Nita looking like a slip of a girl beside the majestic Myra, although she herself has the lines of a stately woman. Myra is, in fact, too big for Ferdinand. She looks as though she could easily break his back—and, from what I hear of married life from confidential sources, she will probably want to break it some day. One can only hope she will have enough self-control to hold her hand when that hour comes.

There is no room for me at Aunt E.'s, so I have a bedroom at Mrs. Willand's hard by. Everyone knows Mrs. Willand's, though I don't know why, unless it is by virtue of the notoriety of a desponding stuffed dog in her front window. It looks like an exhibit from the Veterinary Museum under the catalogue title "Sarcoptic Mange (advanced)." The house, which is one of a long line of villas like a row of postage stamps, is known as "Mrs. Willand's," and my address is "Mrs. Willand's, Old Bourncombe." It is here that a much battered and post-marked official envelope has reached me. I repro-

duce the document as completed with my reply:—

Ref. P.T.  $\frac{06}{A}$

### DOUBLE MINUTE

Margins must on no account be written upon except as regards brief penciled notes. All communications must be addressed to the Department and not to individuals.

H.M. Statistics Office,  
(Malnutrition Dept.)  
Whitehall, London,  
S.W.

*25th July, 19—*  
To: Mr. Thomas A. Quinn

### COMMUNICATION

Date: 3rd August, 19..  
Sir,

1. I have the honor to call your attention to the circumstance that according to the records of this Department, your leave which commenced on the *25th June*, terminated on the *23rd July ult.*

2. It does not appear that you have attended at this Office or that any

### REPLY.

Date: 10th Aug., 19—.

1. It appears that there is an error in the records. Reference should be made to P. X.  $F \frac{42}{S}$  of 4/6.  
T. Q.



communication has been received from you.

3. I have to request that I may receive your observations on this matter without delay.

I have the honor to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

F. C. Binkinter.

Deputy Comptroller of Staff Records, H.M.S.O.

P.S.

Also try solution.

$P\sqrt[3]{\frac{P}{S}}$  for  $N_{31}$

How goes it B., you old blighter?

My postscript was one of those "Brief Penciled notes" specially provided for in the instructions. It would be good fun to see old Binkinter trying to exact the cube root of one of his own file references. They have evidently sent me a reminder intended for someone else.

When I went back to the Pond House after putting up the car at the inn and changing my clothes, I found Nita walking in the garden.

I joined her where she stood passing in review the roses that straggled over the old sunburnt brick wall.

"Well," she said as I came up, while she reached for a bloom. "How is Valerie?"

She was certainly very off-hand in her manner. "Quite well," I said. "Except," I added, "she's got mumps;—you knew that?"

"Mumps!" Nita turned and stared at me with parted lips and laughing eyes. "Is that why you came away then?"

"No. She had them when I arrived."

"Then you never saw her?"

"Only in the distance. She didn't want me to see her."

Nita burst into a peal of laughter, and turned and walked towards the house. "Oh, how lovely!" she cried, and she reeled, and fell up against me in an uncontrollable spasm of gurgles.

"I don't see what there is to laugh at," I said, pretending not to be amused and pushing her away from me. "Why are you so interested in Valerie all of a sudden? You have never even seen her."

"Oh dear!" Nita gasped when she had recovered herself a little. "If you had only heard your mother, you'd be laughing too." She became inarticulate again.

"Aunt Emmy thinks you have been making love to Valerie all this time—she doesn't say so, but one knows what is in her mind. Oh dear!"

"Why does she think that?"

"Oh, I don't know. She *wants* to think it, I suppose. She showed me a letter of yours in which you mentioned Maud and Rachel but did not refer to Valerie. That was conclusive proof for Aunt Emmy.

She's expecting to hear of your engagement by every post. Oh, it's *too* delicious."

"Now then, you'll be late. Supper's on the table," said Aunt Elizabeth from the window in an admonitory tone as though she disapproved of laughter, though, in point of fact, she loves to hear young people about her; and we followed her into the dining-room where the free and easy, movable, holiday meal was awaiting us.

Nita was still laughing when we sat down.

"What's the matter?" said Aunt E. She had not quite regained suavity after the disturbance of my invasion.

"Valerie Graham has got *mumps*," Nita spluttered.

"I don't see anything to laugh at in that," said the old lady severely. "Who told you?"

Nita, with her handkerchief to her mouth, pointed at me.

"Good gracious, I hope you're not bringing infection here," said Aunt Elizabeth, in an alarmed tone.

"It's all right," I said. "It's only a joke. No one was ill at Hildon."

"Not a very pretty joke," the old lady commented. "I hope you won't make such jokes *here*."

Nita looked at me seriously for a moment, and then smiled and subsided with a final, "Oh dear!"

After supper it came out that the two "fiances" were going down to the sea front, so I asked Nita to come, and we would all run down in Susan. Nita

said she would stay with Aunt Elizabeth, but the old lady affected to be indignant at the idea that she could not be left alone, although in fact she values these little attentions; so finally we all four went, and Nita and I sat on the shingle, while the other two strolled up the slope of Shelly Head.

It was pleasant having a yap with Nita again. I told her the incidents of my tour while the moon tried to give the appearance of night to what was very like day, and the waves laved the pebbles with little short "plops" like the sound of rising trout. After a time Nita got quite serious for her. She said she was thinking of going back to Australia. It is all rather hard luck on her. She married poor Bill when he was on the Sydney station, and followed his ship home, and since the accident a few months later (a bag fell on the poor chap when they were coaling ship), she has been staying about or living in rooms, but all her own people are in Australia. She rather dreads going back; I can see that. She has a slender purse, and it's a rough and tumble world, though she is so bright no one would ever think she had any troubles. That's the best of having a sunny temperament. It's just the same thing with me. She seemed tired when we got home, and we found, when we wanted her, that she had slipped away to bed. I am getting to find out that she's a queer girl at bottom. This is what happened yesterday, for instance.

Nita goes in for playing the piano, though she doesn't play for me because she thinks I don't care

for it; but that's all rot; I am very musical, really. Nita plays in a light feathery sort of way and never punches the piano properly. Myra, on the other hand, has a masterful style, and I gather that Nita looks upon her as a corker, and they have matches one against the other. Myra lets fly with a little thing by Podderblitz, and Nita retaliates with a trifle by Bumblepootz that takes twenty minutes, and so they are at it, tit-for-tat, through half an afternoon. You can't talk when Nita is playing, or it would interrupt; and you can't hear yourself speak when Myra is on the job.

Well, yesterday after lunch, Ferdinand had gone to the village and left me in the garden, when I heard the piano and went to the drawing-room window. It was Myra's turn, and as usual she was letting Aunt Elizabeth's piano have it in the neck every time, while Nita was lying back in a chair evidently much enraptured. In order not to disturb them I sat down outside on the window-sill, and listened. It was all a distressing rush and clash of wrong notes, with no time and no tune; and then the din suddenly ended with a sort of change of tone that, in fact, rather took by breath away. Myra's back was towards me and when she ended she sat motionless with her hands on the keys for a moment, and then began to get out her handkerchief. At the same moment Nita rose and went to her, and put her arms round her, and kissed her. I had just realized that I had no business to be present, when Nita caught

sight of me and looked at me gravely, and slightly shook her head, and I stole away.

Later in the afternoon when we had all gone on to the pier where the picket boats from a battleship outside were coming and going, I said to Nita:

"What was wrong with Myra this afternoon?"

She did not reply for a moment. She stood with one knee on the seat gazing down into the beautiful pinnacle that sidled and flirted against the weed-covered piles. After a little she said in a low voice:

"The music made her cry."

"Why? Isn't she happy?"

Again Nita did not answer at once. I was looking at her and her color seemed to mount, and she closed her eyes. Then she stood up and looked me in the face and said quietly but in rather a breathless voice:

"It was because she *is* happy. Can't you understand *that*?"

"I can't understand anyone crying about such music, unless it couldn't be made to stop," I said.

Nita almost frowned at me. She faced me with indignant eyes. Then she spoke impetuously in her quick, bubbling, port wine tones.

"Are you never going to grow up? Don't you realize that you are blind, and deaf, and dumb? What's the good of a man if he is never going to understand!"

She really is an extraordinary woman. I don't see that I had said anything dreadful and what she

meant goodness only knows, but she spoke with vehemence. I had no idea she could show so much feeling. I was taken aback; naturally.

"I simply don't know what you are talking about," I said. "All I mean is that the music had no time, and no tune, and was half wrong notes."

Nita laughed and we walked on together.

"Oh, you're not a bad sort," she said. "There is no reason, I suppose, why you should like a fugue of Bach's; and if you could only make allowances for people to whom such things are like a ray from heaven, there would be some hope for fat Thomas."

"Fat!"

"Yes, fat!"

"Well, I'm really glad you've said that," I told her. "Thank you, Nita. I could not broach the matter myself, but now you have introduced the subject I can go ahead and tell you a thing that has been much on my mind. Tell me: have you looked in the glass lately?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Since I came down here?"

"Yes, of course I have."

"And haven't you noticed anything?"

"Why, what do you mean. What should I notice?"

"Look here, old lady, you can't carry it off like that. You're getting simply enormous. You're like a ripe gooseberry. I never saw such a girl. You look as if you had just been pumped up."

This was perfectly true. I suppose the sea air suits Nita, for she has quite plumped out and looks bonny.

Nita received my communication with an uneasy, doubting concern, which it was charming to watch. I knew she was trying to find a looking-glass. At last she spied one in the top of a weighing machine, and went and frowned at herself, and put up her chin and tried to get a side view. She had probably noticed her own well-being, for she dresses so cleverly that she must pay herself a lot of attention; but she was now evidently perturbed as to how she might strike other people.

She turned from the glass to me with her low-voiced intimate air of appeal to try and get from me a serious opinion in her favor.

"No, T., really! Do you think I am? I know you're joking."

"Indeed it's no joke. You'll be a huge woman in a year or two if you go on at this rate," I laughed. "Look at yourself again. Surely you notice the change."

Nita followed my suggestion and frowned at herself again and was troubled.

"I don't see anything wrong," she said.

"Oh, Nita!"

"Is it *here?*" and she touched herself under the chin.

"Yes," I said.

I told her she ought to weigh herself every day



at noon, and keep tally; and I slipped a penny in the slot for her, and by secretly putting my foot on the stand, I brought her up to ten stone five and almost frightened her.

"You shouldn't be depressed," I told her as we walked away. "It's quite likely you'll grow into a fine big woman."

Her pleasure was being spoilt, so I had to tell her of the trick I had played on her. It was charming to see the ridiculous way she brightened and laughed when I told her she was quite all right. She is like a child in some ways, and the very best of companions—upon my word she is. I never had a sister, but they must be good fun when they are like Nita.

Bat is coming down for the week-end. He is evidently bitten with his success as a trout fisher, for I had a letter this morning proposing another visit to Fradford "to get out the other bounders," and Aunt Elizabeth has let me wire and invite him down—"but mind," she said, "he must understand that he won't get wines and a London cook *here*."

It was just after I wrote these last words, two days ago, that I had a sort of seaside adventure. I still feel flat, and as though I had swallowed a fly, and my head sings a bit. It happened that we

had not come down to the front in Susan. After our bath the party straggled off for various reasons to meet later at lunch, and I was sitting on the beach which, at one o'clock, was almost deserted, when there was a succession of shrieks like a steam whistle, and the next moment I realized that the only bather in view was in difficulties, and that his companion on the beach was letting off the danger signals I heard. I got rid of coat and waistcoat and collar, and had waded in breast-deep before I again saw the man not very far out.

The lady meanwhile was letting off shriek after shriek and all Bourncombe was running. Before I reached the place he had gone. I paddled about looking for a sign and suddenly he came up struggling, and kicked me on the jaw. It must have nearly knocked me out of time, for when I recovered myself I was retching and choking, and the fellow was clutching me. I had a struggle to get up my knee and push him off, but he was pretty well done by that time, and I knew then that I could manage him all right if I took things coolly. I got him on his back and lay on my own and just kicked along with my legs while I held him round the chin, and so towed him. It was a slow business and I had swallowed a lot of water. I think I went into a sort of trance as I pumped along, for a great time seemed to pass, and the next thing was that someone caught hold of me and I found I was standing. All I wanted was just to lie down and be left alone. I

knew they had got the other fellow all right, but I don't know what they did with him. Some other people came and helped me to the beach, and then the crowd closed round in a dense circle and watched me being sick. Soon a young doctor forced his way to me and drove the crowd back, and he and another man drained me, and undressed me and toweled me. Someone produced brandy and I began to feel quite cheerful. I was given my coat and waistcoat, and Brereton, the doctor, lent me an overcoat and gave me an elbow up the beach to his car.

Just as I was making a bit of a tug of it to get up the steep slope of shingle at high water-mark, a man came scrambling along the beach, slid down in an avalanche of stones on top of us, and nearly knocked us both over.

"I congratulate you, sir! Your name, please. The *Bourncombe Advertiser*."

I felt rather lost.

"He wants to know your name for the paper," said Brereton.

"Williams," I said.

"Christian name please, and address."

"Alfred," I said. "Grand Hotel."

"A visitor! Home address?"

"Hundred and seventy-seven Tottenham Court Road."

"London?"

"No, Edinburgh."

Brereton pushed the fellow aside, and we left him

scribbling eagerly in his notebook like a dog with a bone.

As we got into the car, the crowd broke into a cheer. I wondered when I got to Willand's whether, among the people who cheered, I had heard the voice of the person who stole my watch, and three pounds ten in gold, from my pockets while I was in the water. I feel ashamed to mention it, but the thing had been done.

Brereton insisted on coming up and giving me another rub down, and making me put on thick underwear, as I wouldn't go to bed and have a scene, and, in fact, there was no need for it. Brereton wouldn't hear of a fee. He seemed quite hurt. He said he would come again next day and just give me an overhaul.

"Oh no, you just won't," I said. "I know you fellows. You'll tell me I've got Bright's disease, or Mackenzie's disease, and that I ought to go in for Fletcherism or Haigism. The only disease I've got is Quinn's disease, and I like it, and I don't want to be cured at all if it can't be cured by a regular course of Quinnism."

When I reached the luncheon table Aunt Elizabeth made little noises as though she were too indignant to find suitable words in which to express herself.

"What have you been doing? Why are you so late? We've nearly finished. I don't know what

the fish will be like, I'm sure. I told them to put it back in the steamer, so it will be your fault if you don't like it. It's no good trying to keep curry hot, the rice gets dried up, so I had to carve for you. I've done the best I can. There's a cold pie if you like it better."

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," I said, patting her hand, as I sat down.

Everyone looked at me. I hadn't realized that my voice was so croaky.

"Why, what's happened?" said Nita. "Oh, look at him! He's ill!"

So I had to tell them something, and made them laugh, and got them to forget all about it in ten minutes. I had Nita at me after lunch, however. I managed to answer her questions satisfactorily, though she accepted my account grudgingly.

"I believe you are telling fibs," she said.

I can't help realizing, all the same, that I am well out of it; though it would have been a simple business if he hadn't kicked me. I told Ferdinand about it, and he says he saw the fellow just before he left the beach showing off to a girl, and pretending he was an expert, though evidently no swimmer at all. Ferdinand had been amused to watch him. This evening I got a copy of the weekly *Bourncombe Advertiser*. The account is so funny that I reproduce it in full:—

**"FATAL ACCIDENT****ALMOST EVENTUATES****MR. BERT SUTHERLAND****NEARLY DROWNED**

**"Bourncombe was rudely startled last Tuesday by what might have been a fatal bathing misadventure, the victim being no other than the well-known and popular leading comedian of the Marguerite Repertoire Co., now delighting audiences in the Royal Pier Pavilion with the delightful extravaganza 'Rosey Posey Limited,' with Mr. Bert Sutherland in the inimitable personation of 'Porgie Geordie.'**

**"It is a long time since any serious bathing mishap has eventuated at Bourncombe, which is well known as by far the safest beach on the South or any other coast, and thanks to the precautions taken by our worthy Councillors, the Beach Committee, and the R.H.S., it will be supposed that the misadventure of which Mr. Bert Sutherland was the subject was such as must always obtain in reference to those who go down to the sea, whether in ships or in pursuit of the manly sport of bathing; and this it appears was the case.**

**"Mr. Bert Sutherland informs us that he had been swimming for some considerable time in a direction parallel to the beach when he suddenly found himself in difficulties. Fortunately, Miss Girlie Alexander, who is known to our readers by her dainty witchery in the charming part of Rosey Posey, was at the moment reclining on the beach, and realizing that a tragedy might be on the point of commencing, with the most praiseworthy presence of mind appealed to a bystander for assistance. This gentleman, who proves to be Mr. Alfred Williams, of 177 Tottenham**

Court Road, Edinburgh, now a visitor at the Grand Hotel, most gallantly responded to the lady's supplications, and hurriedly divesting himself of his coat and vest, at once plunged into the sea, which, at that hour (1 p.m.) was at about half-tide, and in due course, with the able assistance of Mr. Henry Hinch, who followed Mr. Williams into the water, that gentleman succeeded in being instrumental in the safe restoration of Mr. Bert Sutherland to *terra firma*. After the application of restorative methods by Dr. Hoxton [M.D.], who was providentially passing in his motor brougham at the time, Mr. Bert Sutherland was conveyed to his suite at Sandview Private Hotel which, under the personal direction of the proprietress, Mrs. Bunyan, is so deservedly popular with our theatrical visitors.

"Mr. Bert Sutherland was unable to appear in Rosey, Posey Limited, on Wednesday, but on Thursday evening he rejoined the cast, when his appearance on the stage led to an ovation which speaks well for the popularity of this screaming comedian among Bourncombe visitors and residents."

## CHAPTER X

### CANON TABB MEETS BAT VERNON

**B**AT burst upon us in all his glory on Saturday. His arrival was a tremendous success from his point of view. He had told us to expect him to lunch, and at half-past eleven we were all in the sea, and I was standing, after my swim, watching Myra and Nita teaching each other to float, and looking at Nita's ten toes sticking up out of the water, which I observed to be smaller and pinker than Myra's, when something seized me by the ankles, and before I knew what was happening, I was shot up into the air and fell back head over heels into the water. For the moment I thought I was again in the clutches of Mr. Bert Sutherland, but when I got my head out it was to see Bat laughing at the success with which he had come all the way from London and torpedoed me. He had got away earlier than he expected and, after calling at the house, had followed us down.

"Oh, it's you, is it?"

"Yes," said Bat, "it's me all right, but it's not my bathing-suit," he added, hitching the garment over



his shoulder. "It's the bathing-suit Professor Dowson, the champion weight-lifter, expanded last year."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"It's quite all right. The bathing 'pro.' told me it was the suit Dowson wore. It's been burst by Professor Dowson, and that makes it valuable."

Here Bat went under.

"Where are the ladies?" he said, sweeping back his hair. "Are those they? Introduce me now, will you?"

"Come along," I said, so we dived and swam under water with hands linked, and came up like twins close to the pair. It is impossible to be serious in the water.

Bat, unable to forget his ill-fitting dress, of course dragged in Dowson.

"Yes. T.'s quite right," he said, when I introduced him, "it's me, but it's not my dress. It's the one they got Professor Dowson down to stretch for them last year, and he stretched it too far."

He and I went out to the deserted diving-boat, and, on the far side of it, kicked off our costumes and revelled in a swim as alone it can be fully enjoyed: and that is mother naked, with one's clean, slick limbs urging one forward in great bounds, and the water gurgling at one's ear, racing over one's skin from shoulder to heel, and nursing one secure in delicious arms, while one's body tingles with vitality and the sense of being. There was a moment when I could have leaped from the water like a salmon. I felt I

was supreme and a man. I felt there was a woman for me somewhere. But where? How glorious to swim beside her and see her sunlit hair twisted up dry upon her head, and the blue water crumbling white against her neck and gushing over her soft contours! And then to kiss her, all wet and laughing! I thought of Rachel, but she didn't quite fit, somehow. She would be rather too solid and prosaic—though I do admire her most tremendously all the same. What I seemed to want was a goddess. The trouble is that hardly any woman is perfect. Many are quite dazzling at first shock, but very soon one discovers their blemishes. I don't like women who wriggle, for one thing. Over the portal of my affections it is written: "Abandon wriggling, ye who'd enter here."

Bat is the prettiest swimmer I know. He cuts the water in long surges in which you will hardly trace the moment of impulse. He makes so little disturbance that the drops running from his fingers, as his arm is raised and poised above the water, seem to rebound from the glassy blue surface and ride away like pearls upon a hard dry sea. He is one of those men who can float only with difficulty, while I lie out on the water on my chest like a frog.

The result of Bat's aquatic introduction was that when we all met again on the beach it was as though he had known Myra and Nita intimately for months. I suppose that since he had seen them out of their clothes they felt that their show was already given

away, and they made no attempt to engage him with barricades up and all bunting flying, which is the enigmatic way pretty women always seem to greet the approach of a strange man. This was no doubt Bat's idea when he plunged into the sea on top of us. He is a knowing old bird—a very thoughtful man in his own way.

Bat, of course, played off Professor Dowson again on Aunt Elizabeth at lunch. She had no sort of idea what he was talking about, and this, as usual, delighted Bat. He gets on splendidly with the old lady, and she was all smiles and graces while he was with us, and he did not shock her once, though this is a thing I can hardly avoid doing from hour to hour.

We were a merry part at lunch, and a remark of Myra's led us to the idea of giving up the afternoon to a prawning expedition.

"The great thing in fishing for prawns," said Bat oracularly, after a preliminary cough, "is to catch the little beggars by the whiskers. All you want is a pair of tongs. Then you are all right."

"I hope you play bridge, Mr. Vernon," said Aunt Elizabeth. It appeared that she had invited the incumbent of St. Audrey's to dinner.

"Mr. Tabb is the best bridge-player in Bourncombe," she said, shaking her finger at me, "so mind!"

"Tabb!" I said. "Is that Montague James Erasmus, editor of *Tidds' Biblical Almanac*?"

"I don't know anything about the almanac, but he is a very clever person, so you had better be on your

best behavior, young man," Aunt Elizabeth admonished me.

"Is he Canon Tabb of Tanbury?"

"Yes. He is taking Mr. Booth's place while he is away on his holiday."

"By jove, it's the editor," I said, laughing. "Is Mrs. Tabb coming too?"

Aunt E. did not reply for a moment. Then she said in a low voice—

"The Canon was not blessed in marriage. His wife left him, poor man. She is doing typewriting in America, they say."

"Ha, ha!" I cried triumphantly. "I should like to meet Mrs. Tabb. She must be the right sort."

"Well, really, Thomas," complained the old lady, "you have the most extraordinary manners of anyone I know."

"But, my dear aunt," I assured her, "you'd laugh, too, if you'd read his book on marriage. Nita," I cried, "Canon Tabb, Professor of Matrimony, is coming to dinner, so keep a long upper lip tonight, and no laughing, please; and Myra, couldn't you raise a red nose for the occasion and wear one of Nita's old dresses inside out, and make Ferdinand brush his hair well down into his eyes and look chastened? You see," I explained to Aunt Elizabeth, "it would only be kind to try and keep poor Mr. Tabb in countenance."

Aunt E. sighed and shrugged her shoulders, as she does when she feels out of her depth, so I patted her on the hand and told her it was all right.

After lunch, when Ferdinand, in his quiet way, had gone off to arrange about the prawning gear, I told Bat of Tabb's book.

"It's all very well," he said, "but he probably knows his job a good deal better than you think. I've a respect for the Church, and I can tell you that these downy old boys make a very good thing out of it. Your mother gave you the book; well, that was a shilling for Tabb, and there are probably thousands and thousands of mothers doing the same for *their* sons and for Tabb, and Tabb, for all you know, is feathering his nest very well."

"But it's the most horrible cant you ever read."

"Exactly," said Bat. "There's an enormous demand for cant."

I felt stumped out, as I always do when Bat turns on his worldly wisdom tap.

Just at this point Nita and Myra joined us, dressed for prawning, each looking like the old lady of the nursery rhyme after her engagement with the pedlar named Stout; and we all five of us packed down into Susan and started off on our expedition; the ladies in their improvised prawning skirts and with bathing shoes on their stockinged feet. It is wonderful how enduring is the grace of a comely woman. I could see that Nita filled Bat's eye, and I felt an uncle's pride in her. In the course of the evening, after she sat down in two feet of water, her appearance was even improved.

Myra quickly retired up the beach after we started

fishing, where Ferinand soon joined her; the explanation offered was that Myra did not like crabs. Nita stuck out the crabs all right, with the help of a few screams in which Bat joined. There were certainly plenty of crabs. If we had been out after crabs we should have had nothing to complain of.

"You know," Bat told Nita, "you can't tickle prawns as you can trout. The little blighters always tickle you first and put you off the job. It's the same with a crab. You can't tickle a crab, because the beggar is much better at tickling than you are. You try it, and you'll see what I mean."

However, we did not go back empty-handed. We caught a prawn at last. We all caught him, but I caught him most. It was in the excitement of this chase that Nita met with her mishap.

We ran Nita home at once. As she stood in the back of the car I could hear Bat complaining to her.

"Look here, Mrs. Fargeon, you're dripping on me. A-A-Ah! I say! Look out! you're making me all damp! Why don't you sit down. These brine compresses are splendid things. They're all the rage just now. It's a solemn fact. They'd charge you two guineas in Harley Street for prescribing something far inferior to what you've got on now."

Bat and I were standing together in the garden, each with a gin and Vermouth as a whet for dinner, when the parlormaid came unexpectedly to the draw-

ing-room window and told us that Canon Tabb had arrived, and the next moment there he was, rubbing his hands together under his chin with an action as though he were washing them and gazing at us from the hearth-rug. As we couldn't take the drinks into the drawing-room I asked him to come outside. When I invited him to have a cocktail, he threw up one hand and turned his head aside with a sound resembling a groan.

He is a tall, loosely built, drooping, shaven man, with a very bald head bearing a long tuft of thin sandy red hair on the center of the forehead, which is brushed back in a sort of plume. He has a heavy beaky nose and a long lip with a little rabbit chin below, and eyes like oysters. Although slim, he has an appearance of excessive comfort about the waist, and he calls to mind some unholy sort of bird. His shoulders also are like a bird's. He is a man of fifty, rather seamed about the face, but with a little color. He looked from Bat to me over his eyeglasses while he held his hands behind his back. He appeared so exactly as though he were going to shake his head at us and groan disapproval again, that if we had not been laughing when he surprised us we should have had some difficulty in avoiding an appearance of undue gaiety. As it was, I am afraid we behaved rather badly; but it is impossible to be serious when Bat is feeling happy, and I was feeling happy too, and the intrusion of the exotic Tabb at that moment was more than our gravity could compass.

## CANON TABB MEETS BAT VERNON 173

"Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Vernon," I said. "Mr. Vernon is the captor of Edward. You have perhaps read of his exploit in *The Field*, Canon Tabb."

Tabb bowed.

"And this," said Bat, "is my friend, Mr. Alfred Williams, of Hundred and Seventy-seven Tottenham Court Road, Edinburgh, of whom you may have read an account in today's paper."

"Mr. Tabb's name is no doubt familiar to you as joint editor of *Tidds' Biblical Almanac*," I said to Bat.

"Tidds!" exclaimed Bat. "I know Tidds' dog biscuits, of course. They're famous all the world over. Everyone knows Tidds."

"Totally different thing—different firm altogether," said Tabb quickly.

"Well, anyhow, they're splendid things, those dog biscuits," Bat went on, enthusiastically. "Do you know," he said impressively, "that there's *meat* in them! It's a solemn fact. They're most excellent things. I'm sure you're to be congratulated, Canon Tabb, whether it's the same firm or not."

At this moment Aunt Elizabeth's voice reached us from the window: "Ah! there you are!" Tabb crept back into the room with a movement which was one long-drawn obeisance, his shoulders drooping and his coat hanging much longer in front than behind. Aunt Elizabeth always warms up when a parson is within her horizon, in fact she is never quite herself, I think,



unless one is at hand. The old lady actually sported ear-rings in honor of the occasion, and had an effect of white lace about her bust, and a brighter color and a readier smile than usual. She is a grand old dame, and Tabb looked a particularly gaunt and unwholesome object as he stood before her.

At dinner Tabb's demeanor was one of polite indifference to four of us, with a certain warmth of condescension towards Ferdinand. During the whole time he sat with a distinct list in Aunt Elizabeth's direction, and kept up a low-toned private conversation with her in which she joined with an appearance of even gaiety.

With the idea of making him leave go of Aunt Elizabeth, and thaw him out, I said: "I hear you're a bridge-player, Canon. Have you heard the story of the curate who took a hand with his bishop?"

Tabb looked at me over his spectacles as if I were a museum specimen of grave import. He never looks over his glasses at Aunt Elizabeth, and not always at Ferdinand, so I imagine that it is merely a defensive habit.

"Well!" I said, addressing myself to Tabb, who remained looking at me unwinkingly with the naked oyster, "the curate was the new precentor, and the bishop asked him to dinner. During dinner the bishop asked his curate if he played cards, and the curate answered 'Oh, yes. Ha! Ha!' But as the unfortunate curate was suffering from nervousness and replied 'Oh, yes. Ha! Ha!' to everything the bishop

said to him, the bishop inquired a little sternly:

"Do you play bridge?"

"Oh, yes; at least, I haven't played a great deal, but I've read a lot about it. Ha! Ha!"

"Then you'd like to take a hand?"

"Oh, yes. Ha! Ha!"

"When they went into the drawing-room the tables were got ready and the bishop and the curate sat at the same table and were cut for partners."

"Now this is the bit that wants following closely," I warned the company.

"The dealer who was on the left of the curate declared 'No trumps.'"

"The bishop doubled and led the ace of hearts. 'Dummy' played the four of hearts, and

"The curate threw the ace of clubs and cried 'SNAP.'"

Nita and Myra laughed, and Tabb looked repeatedly from one to the other over his glasses, as though he were comparing them; then he looked in turn at Bat, at me, and at Ferdinand; and last he lifted his head and looked at Aunt Elizabeth, and then slowly responded to the amusement in her face with a pursed smile.

"Really, these young people are so ridiculous," said Aunt Elizabeth, "that they make one laugh in spite of oneself."

After the ladies left the table, Bat opened the conversation by telling Tabb we had been prawn fishing, and developed his theories on prawning; and

then, finding that Tabb had a distant interest in fly-fishing, he gave him a playful account of the capture of Edward and of the style of fishing he himself favored, and the flies he liked best. Tabb listened to all this with his elbow on the table, his face resting on the palm of his hand, and his expressionless eyes fixed on the speaker.

A footstep was heard on the gravel, and Ferdinand went to the window and then vanished into the night. Tabb stared round after him and then turned and pillowed his head on his hand again.

"Mr. Wilson is responding to the call of the wild," I said to Tabb. "He is very sensible of the charms of darkness just now."

"It's a queer thing, you know," said Bat, "but a woman is always most appealing when you can't see her. Haven't you noticed it?" he asked Tabb. "That's why they cover themselves with big hats, and fluff out their hair, and peep at you through a veil with one eye, from a mass of fur or feathers. They're all quite irresistible when they do that. Don't you think so?"

"I don't agree with you," I said. "You're leaving out the spiritual appeal. The less graceful, the more gawky, ill-dressed, and ugly a woman is, the more readily she kindles the flame of spiritual exaltation. All flesh is vile. It ruins the spiritual significance of the dual state. Is it not so, Canon?"

"It depends entirely where it is, whether it is vile or not," said Bat. "That's just what you fellows

can never understand. If you mean on the ankles, I entirely agree with you; I can't endure a girl with her calves running down into her shoes; but upon the shoulders, for instance. No! no! There's nothing vile about it then. Quite the reverse."

Tabb stirred in his chair and sat back with his hands resting on the table before him, and quite forgot to look over the top of his glasses.

"You entirely misunderstand me in supposing that I used the word as a butcher would," I replied. "You talk like a pagan. There is no credit in admiring an athletic man or a beautiful woman. That's what the ancient Greeks did. Have you forgotten all about the holy men in the Middle Ages who lived in sties, or holes in the ground, starving on offal; and who remained unwashed and crawled over by vermin all their lives to prove, by actual example, that the Greek ideal was unworthy? There is no credit whatever in being alive to the appeals of physical perfection. Even a bullock knows a pretty cow when he sees one. The supreme attainment of humanity is to find affinity, through pity and sorrow, in ugliness, incompetence, dirt, and disease; when you have achieved *that*, my boy, you will be in a position to boast, and not before. Am I not right, Canon?"

"In principle, yes, Mr.—er—" said Tabb, halting for my name, "but the manner in which you—ah—expressed yourself would be considered in the sphere in which my own humble lot is cast as, if I may say so, infelicitous: your illustrations were—unusual—ah

—quite unconventional; unconventional. It was only last month that I had occasion to remind a very dear friend of mine, now, I regret to say, slowly recovering from a dangerous illness endured with exemplary fortitude, that, alas! it is not meant that we should regard our ideals as practical aspirations; and this dear friend replied,” Tabb went on, smiling bemused at his glasses which he was dangling before his nose, “in words which I shall never forget, ‘My dear Canon, I am grateful now, as ever, for the quickening lucidity of your mind,—‘quickenning lucidity’—quite admirably expressed, I think.” He glanced at us.

“Quite! and I, too, entirely agree with you, Canon Tabb,” said Bat. “No one can apply ideals, and that’s why I don’t try. I like girls to be nice and plump, but slim and fairly tall; not too young, and, for preference, fair; bright, and good dressers, and thoroughly conscious of the appeals they make, with a bit of money of their own, and lots and lots of them. Then I begin to think of marriage. But I tell you what it is—I like ’em dainty. I do. Nothing’s too dainty for me. I nearly got caught once,” he went on confidentially to Tabb, who had again put his arm on the table and pillowed his head, and was gazing wearily at Bat with the naked oyster as before. “I had quite met my fate, as I thought. I was just taking a last hasty look round—calling about everywhere to make sure I had not overlooked anything, and having a last look at all the other ones so as to be sure I hadn’t

made a mistake about any of them before. I finally committed myself—when it happened! But it was only a last precaution, you must understand. I had quite made up my mind that it was all right.

"Well, it was like this—you don't mind my telling you, do you? Well, you see, we were in a garden. There was a garden party going on—you know the idea. We were in a remote shrubbery out of view, and she suddenly noticed that a lace trimming inside her skirt had come loose and was hanging down in one place. I was able to produce a pin, but she stooped down; tore the whole thing out; crushed it into a ball, and threw it away out of sight among the bushes."

He stopped.

"Well, what then?" I asked.

"Well! Then it was all over," said Bat. There was another pause.

"Tell me"? asked Tabb, sitting up again. "Why did the incident you describe affect your intentions towards the young lady?"

"It wasn't being dainty," said Bat.

Tabb cast down his eyes and slowly shook his head, while a smothered groan escaped him.

"But I'll tell you what it is," Bat went on, "there's one thing that is wrong with all of them; have you noticed, Canon, that no woman is long enough in the leg? There never was a woman whose legs were the proper length. And they all know it. They do. That's why they wear high heels and deceptive waists,

and stand on a book when they are photographed in their Court dresses. Even the great hotel and railway companies play up to it, and try to get their barmaids to look right. Have you ever noticed, Canon, that they make the floor behind the bar three or four inches higher than the level we stand on? Well, its a fact. They do it on purpose. That's how it is they get us on."

Tabb had not appeared to be listening while Bat was speaking. He was making circles on the cloth with the foot of his wineglass. Directly Bat stopped he broke in.

"I will tell you a beautiful experience of my own," he said, "among many, many such experiences which I have exp—to which I have been subject, and which illustrates the spiritual significance of the dual state to which Mr. Quinn has referred. One of my poor people, a woman of my parish, became engaged to a young man from a neighboring parish. He was a young man who was highly spoken of by the rector of that parish; and he employed himself humbly with a little cart, to which he harnessed his ass; and he and his ass from day to day collected rags, and bones, and disused bottles, and the sustenance of pigs, and whatnot from the houses of the rich, and by so doing preserved what might otherwise have been wasted. On Sundays he helped the clerk, and rang the bell, and I do not doubt that if Providence had so willed he would now be holding the position of clerk in the parish, in which he had been born, and in which he

had spent so many happy and fruitful years—years not only of piety but of material welfare. Well, this poor young man, as the day of his nuptials approached, found himself becoming gradually afflicted with carbuncles—”

“Look here,” said Ferdinand suddenly from the window, “the ladies say you’ve got to come and play bridge.”

Bat and I started up from our chairs with alacrity, so that I cannot say what Tabb’s beautiful experience with the afflicted scavenger actually was.

When we gained the drawing-room we found the table set for cards and Nita, especially, in very high feather. To calm her down a ~~bit~~, I tucked the joker into the back of her dress so adroitly, and at such a moment, that it looked as though Tabb had done it, and I had the pleasure of watching his face when he unexpectedly met Nita’s swift flashing glance of questioning astonishment. I won’t attempt to describe it, but it persuaded me that Tabb is not such an old sheep as he makes out.

Nita and I were partners against Tabb and Myra. Bat sat out and entertained Aunt Elizabeth, while Ferdinand took up a position behind Myra and glowed in her radiance while he pretended to watch her play.

Nita dealt the first hand, laughing and talking the while, and then cheerfully asked us to count our cards.

“Twelve,” I announced. “How many have you, Mr. Tabb?”



"My hand is correct," said Tabb.

"I've only got ten," cried Nita. "There must be some missing."

"No, it's all right," Myra exclaimed; "I've got seventeen. It's only a misdeal."

So Nita had another try and we all watched her, and she did it very nicely. As I shuffled the pack I was tempted by Tabb's weighty demeanor to test his reputation as the best bridge-player in Bourncombe.

Nothing particular happened until the fourth hand had been played, when it was observed that Tabb was in difficulties in counting the tricks. They were on the table before him but, do what he would, he could not make seven and five total thirteen. Two hands earlier he had been content to count his own tricks only; but now he handled and examined all the tricks, and finally he counted the pack and found that there were only forty-eight cards. I then took the four queens out of my pocket and gave them to him.

Tabb couldn't see the joke. The only effect upon him was that he became pensive, like a bird with indigestion. Nita kept me in countenance by laughing so uproariously that Aunt Elizabeth began to grow restive in her chair. It is not the first time that I have taken the queens out of the pack, as Nita is aware, and she is also aware that no one ever misses them.

\ All Tabb said was:

"Tell me? Were the queens missing when the pack was dealt before?"

I had to inform him they were.

After that we settled down, for it was evident that Aunt Elizabeth was a little vexed at what was going on. Tabb played a sound game, but he has an annoying way, when he is third or fourth player, of naming, under his breath, the card he has got to beat, before referring to his own hand.

We won the first rubber, and then Bat took Myra's place. The principle of Bat's game is to lose, as soon as possible, every trick he thinks he has got to lose, so as to be able to throw down a string of best cards with a flourish at the end. This often costs him dear, but he can't play a bit, anyhow, and doesn't want to learn.

He offered to explain to us what the lady in Collier's picture "The Cheat" had done in order to justify the painting, which shows a bridge-table, and one player in the act of challenging another, who is guilty. We none of us knew what was intended, but Bat explained.

"It's quite simple," he said. "What the beggars do is to secretly substitute a winning card drawn from the tricks on the table, for a worthless card, and to play it again."

Tabb could not follow this, so Bat offered to "teach him how to do it," and the cards were dealt round. With much fumbling and by dint of drawing away our attention by saying "What's that on the wall over there," and so on, he managed to take two tricks with the ace of diamonds, and three with

the ace of clubs, and seemed much delighted.

Tabb was still not satisfied. "But I perceived what you were doing," he protested.

"Exactly," said Bat. "I told you I was going to cheat. You were on the look-out. These people in fast society don't tell you beforehand, mind that. They just cheat you and bolt."

"It seems incredible," said Tabb, "that it should not be remarked when the ace of clubs is played three times by the same player from the one hand."

"It's no more remarkable than that it was not noticed just now that all the queens were missing. Besides, you can always pass a winning card under the table, Canon, and let your partner have a turn with it. Of course they are found out sometimes, or we should not know they do it, and Mr. Collier would not be able to paint them at the job."

Tabb seemed puzzled but not convinced.

"Have you seen this card trick?" said Bat. And he began a simple little card trick, popular with children, in which knaves, queens and kings after being "put to bed" promiscuously are found, when the pack has been manipulated and cut, in their respective downies.

Tabb, however, in spite of Bat's attempts to hold him, looked at his watch, and then withdrew and engaged Aunt Elizabeth in conversation. Shortly afterwards he bowed himself out.

Aunt Elizabeth is, I am afraid, annoyed with us, but I don't see why she should put it all on me.

She says I am one of the family, and should try to make her guests feel at home. That, however, is Ferdinand's job; besides, I cannot help Tabb being so ridiculous. It was all pure fun, and one must have a bit of fun sometimes. If Tabb had ruled the roost it would have been a horribly dull evening, and Aunt Elizabeth would then have got at me from the other side, I suppose. Nita did not seem to think anything of it though she kept a long face when Aunt Elizabeth was letting fly at me.

## CHAPTER XI

### MODESTY REWARDED

**A** DAY or two after the Monday morning when I saw Bat into the London train, Nita and I were sitting on the beach, trying which of us could make the highest pile by building single stones one on top of another, when a shadow fell upon our labors, and I heard a voice say:

"That's him."

I looked up and saw two men standing before us. The taller of the two, who had spoken, and who nudged the air in my direction, was a stranger to me. The face of the shorter man seemed familiar, however, and a moment later I realized that I was confronted by Mr. Bert Sutherland. He was dressed in rather dirty white flannels; blacked boots; a double-breasted blue cheviot coat; pink satin tie; wore a buff-colored Homburgh hat with a broad blue ribbon, and carried a very long crook-handled walking-stick with a chased gold band. In his other hand he held a large white envelope.

"Am I to understand that I am addressing the gentleman to whom I owe the preservation of my life?" he asked, advancing.

I hardly knew what to say. The situation was ridiculous, and I felt Nita to be all ears.

"That's him right enough," said the companion, who had closed up and was picking a bit of seaweed to pieces in his fingers as he looked at me seriously.

"I pulled you out the other day if that's what you mean," I said. "I hope you are none the worse."

"I hardly know how to thank you, sir. I went to the 'Grand,' but there's some mistake, for they said you were not staying there; and I've been to some other hotels too. But this gentleman said he'd seen you down here of a morning, so now I've found you."

"That's all right," I said. "I hope you're quite fit again."

"I shouldn't be if it wasn't for you. I'm proud to be a Briton and an Englishman like you. I don't know what happened myself, but they told me how you behaved. I call it heroic. It's my idea of a gentleman. I think you ought to have a presentation saving me like that. I can't say what I feel. I want you to be on the free list. There's a box for you whenever you like to ask for it. Inquire for Mr. Graham Dennis at the Box Office, he will look after you. I've made it all right with him, so don't worry. I hope you'll come and bring your friends,"—he looked towards Nita. "And if you will all come round behind after the second act, it will make us proud and Miss Alexander too. My heart is too full for words, and as the poet says, 'It's a full heart that never rejoices,'

and it makes me feel serious all the time. I'm sure the whole company is indebted to you. I want you to accept this photograph as a poor return for the service you have rendered me, and I hope you will remember it always."

As he spoke he took a very large photograph out of the envelope and handed it to me. It represented the speaker dressed in new clothes, with his hair brushed to perfection, standing among rich furniture with an earnest, fixed expression, as though he had been stuffed for exhibition.

Across the lower right-hand corner an inscription had been written in bold unflinching characters:

"Presented by Bert Sutherland of the Marguerite Light Opera Company (Rosey Posey Limited) with heartfelt thanks to his preserver, Alfred Williams, Esqre."

I looked at the photograph and thanked Mr. Sutherland, and he handed me the envelope. I was glad he had not left any of the talking to me.

"Might I request a reciprocal gift of your photo, sir?"

"I'm afraid I haven't got any," I said.

"Perhaps you will be able to send one. I should take it kindly, sir. If you address to the agency mentioned on this card, it will always find me."

"Right. I'll note it," I said.

It was extremely awkward that Nita should overhear everything. It made me feel such an ass. I was thankful when Mr. Sutherland, with many bows

to Nita and farewell salutations to me, moved away with his friend.

I never felt such a fool in my life as I did when he left us. I knew Nita was staring at me. I was so ashamed that when I tried to look at her I couldn't.

Suddenly she jumped up and hurried after the two men, and engaged them in conversation. I could see the friend, excited by Mr. Sutherland's gesticulations, bound on to the stage, thrust the chief performer aside, and give a display in pantomime with such energy that it was afterwards necessary for him to mop his forehead. At one moment it looked as though Nita might become caught in the vortex of his enthusiasm and receive some hurt.

It was five minutes before Mr. Sutherland and his friend walked away. Nita rejoined me pensively where I was digging in the shingle with my hands. She sat down beside me without a word, while I worked away.

When at last I glanced up at her it was to find her looking at me with a tooth on her lip and eyes that were brimming with tears.

"What on earth's the matter with you," I said. "You're as bad as Myra."

It is the first time I ever saw Nita angry. I couldn't have believed it. Her whole face changed; her eyes drank back their tears instantly and blazed at me. As I recall her she looked rather fine, but one felt one had to be careful. She did not raise her voice, it seemed toneless. I can see her now



striking her knee with the fist clenched and her thumb sticking out in the ridiculous way women do it.

"I'm not," she said. "I'm not. How dare you say a thing like that to me. As if I cared a fig about you and your affectations. I was thinking of that poor man;—perhaps he's married—he might have been drowned if—— And: Why, what are you doing?" she exclaimed with a change of tone.

"Burying Bert," I said as I pressed the wretched photograph into the hole and began to rake sand and shingle over it.

"You're not to—you mustn't," cried Nita. She fell forward on her knees and began digging with her hands. She was as active as a cat. I tried to fill up, but she forced her hand down and got hold of the photograph, and I did too. It began to tear. Nita was beside herself. She seemed to sob. I had to leave go, and when she had the thing safe she scrambled wildly up the beach with it like an animal, as though she thought I was going to run after her and take it away. It was all most annoying and humiliating. I began to feel angry. I saw her go up to where Aunt Elizabeth was sitting, and hide the photograph away among the bathing things. Then she came back to me and sat down.

"I feel perfectly ashamed of you," she began. "And look here, Thomas, you've got to send that poor man your photograph, do you hear."

"I can hear," I said; "but I won't send it."

"You must," said Nita. "If you don't I shall give

him the one Aunt Elizabeth—I shall ask your mother for one and send it to him myself, so there, Mr. Thomas.”

All the stuffing seemed to go out of Nita all of a sudden and she got pink.

“What’s the matter now,” I said. “You’re blushing. What’s Aunt Elizabeth got to do with my photographs?”

“She hasn’t anything to do with them, and I’m sure I don’t want any of them; looking so solemn and important in them and thinking yourself such a fine fellow, and snubbing that poor man who was trying his best to thank you for saving his life. Who are you that you should save people’s lives and then put on a pose as though you were ashamed of having done it. I hate men who are self-conscious and affected. They are not men at all. That poor Mr. Sutherland is twice the man you are. He is a human being at any rate.”

I felt I had been punished enough, one way and another, for pulling the blighter out of the water, so I got up and left Nita to talk to herself if she wanted to hear her own voice.

As I stood I said: “Well, you’ve taught me one lesson at any rate. Just go in now, and begin to drown, and see if I will pull you out. I shall just sit up there talking to Aunt Elizabeth as if nothing was happening.”

As I chatted with Aunt Elizabeth I could see Nita supporting herself with one arm, while with the other

she tossed pebbles down the beach; and so she remained for nearly half an hour, until Aunt Elizabeth asked me to call to her that it was time to go home.

I can't understand the woman. There must be something wrong with her. She was rather flushed at lunch and hardly spoke, and once, I declare, was nearly in tears again.

After lunch she came to me quietly in the garden and said softly, "Here you are, Thomas," and handed me the detested envelope with the torn edge.

"Thanks," I said.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Bury it."

Nita cast her eyes to the ground in silence.

"What else can I do," I wailed. "Do you expect me to frame the wretched thing, or wear it round my neck like an order? What *can* I do with it? If I hide it, some one will find it. If I lock it away, it will be dragged out after I am dead, or I shall forget it and come upon it unawares and have a fit. How can I do anything with it but destroy it?"

Nita had nothing to say.

"Now look here, Nita, you haven't been very nice to me today," I went on; "you shall be parson and crumble the earth, while I do the sexton's job."

Nita smiled faintly and we went round beyond the shrubbery, and I got a trowel from the potting shed. Just as I was beginning to dig, Nita exclaimed:

"Oh, don't bury it, Thomas, you'll spoil it! Do let me keep it."

"Well, you really are the most ridiculous girl I ever heard of. What perfect folly! Keep it! You'll compromise yourself dragging about a photograph the size of a chess-board with you wherever you go. The thing's impossible. It must be destroyed."

"No, no," pleaded Nita. "Not yet. Let me keep it; for a little."

She appeared to clasp the thing in her arms as she spoke.

"But what do you want to do with it?"

"Only keep it."

"Keep it!"

"Yes, Thomas, that's all."

"Well," I sighed in utter perplexity, "I suppose I shall have to agree, but you must lock it up and not show it to a soul: promise?"

"All right," said Nita, in a very doubtful voice.

"Why! What's the matter now?"

"Well, will you let me show it to Myra?"

"No, I will not. It's too bad of you trying to make a fool of me like this. It must go to its funeral. You will show it to my mother, and I shall be obliged to fly the country."

"No, no. Never to her, Thomas," Nita said earnestly.

"It won't do, old girl. It must be buried. So come on. Be nice and help me. Why don't you ask Bert to inscribe one of his photographs for you? He'd do it like a shot."

So we buried Bert and trod him well down, and

smoothed the earth over him and left him to rot.

"Feel better?" I asked her as we walked away. But Nita made no reply.

There is no release from Mr. Sutherland for me.

At the end of the week Ferdinand handed me a copy of the *Bourncombe Advertiser*, and pointed to a paragraph.

"Read that," he said with a grin.

### "THE MODESTY OF VALOR

LOCAL HEROISM BY A BOURNCOMBE GENTLEMAN

'TOO MODEST BY HALF'

The act of local heroism which we reported in our last issue and by which the life of Mr. Bert Sutherland has been preserved to the Marguerite Light Opera Company, gives an interesting example of what has been so aptly described as the 'Modesty of Valor.' It appears that the gentleman who rescued Mr. Bert Sutherland at the risk of his own life, and who led our representative to understand that his name was Alfred Williams, Esq., of Edinburgh, a visitor at the Grand Hotel, proves to be none other than Mr. Thomas Alphonse Grinn, a nephew of Lady Wilson, relic of the late General Sir Edward Wilson, K.C.B., who resides at the Pond House, Pond Lane, Old Town. We owe this information to Mr. Bert Sutherland himself who has been indefatigable in tracking down his preserver. Mr. Grinn is to be congratulated on his manly British qualities, and we are glad that we may claim him as a resident and add his name to the long list of local heroes of which Bourncombe is so justly proud."

While I was reading the stuff Myra joined us with rather a subdued air.

"We'd better not let Aunt Elizabeth see this," I said as I finished.

"She has seen it," said Myra. "The cook showed it to her. No, don't go in to her now," she continued, detaining me. "She's very much upset. But it's all right. Nita is with her."

"Nita!" I cried. "Why the whole thing is Nita's doing! If it had not been for her, no one need have known anything about it. I'll never pull anyone out of the water again. A fellow like this Sutherland ought to be drowned. It's what the sea is for."

I was thoroughly annoyed, I admit.

"But why is Aunt Elizabeth upset?" I asked. "She would naturally be vexed; but there's no reason why she should be upset."

"She doesn't like being called a relic," said Myra gravely.

We looked at each other with blank faces.

"By Jove!" I exclaimed as an idea struck me, "I can get a little bit back anyhow"—and I went to the writing-table and wrote as follows:

"POND HOUSE,  
OLD TOWN.

To the Editor,

The *Bourncombe Advertiser*.

SIR,

As you consider that I am not entitled to the

anonymity I thought I might venture to claim in a private matter which concerned no one but Mr. Bert Sutherland and myself, may I express the hope that Bourncombe Residents and Visitors will acclaim your announcement that I am 'too modest by half,' and that they will not allow their own modesty to interfere with the early return to me of my watch, watch-chain and pencil-case, and three pounds ten in gold, which disappeared from the pockets of my waistcoat while I was advertising myself in the sea?

Your obedient Servant,

T. ALPHONSE GRINN."

It is not often one has a chance of insulting a whole town at one go, and I felt much nicer after writing the letter. It was duly published but I never got back my property, although I had previously put the police on the track of it.

As I rose from the table Nita came in.

"She's better now. It's best to leave her alone," she said as I left the room.

When I reached the drawing-room I found the dear old soul crouching in a chair. She tried to pull herself together when I came in, and I sat down beside her and made love to her. She likes it.

"I never thought I should live to be called a 'relic' in a newspaper," she murmured while she dabbed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"They mean *relict*," I said; "everyone will understand that. It's quite a different thing. It's a legal

term like spinster, only much nicer. It's a great compliment to be called a relict."

"And to call him Sir Edward!" she complained. "As if everyone did not know his name. The dear General! Is this his country's gratitude to him, after fourteen medals and the White Elephant of Siam?"

"The paper's an absurdity," I said. "No one ever bothers about what it says."

"And why do they call you Mr. Grinn?" Aunt Elizabeth asked me indignantly. "I never heard such a name. I'm sure no sister of mine would have married a man with a name like that. Grinn indeed!"

"Well," I said, "it's not my doing. If it hadn't been for Nita no one would have known anything about it."

"But you saved this Mr. Bert Sutherland from the sea?"

"Oh yes, I pulled him out."

"I wish you would let other people do these things," the old lady complained gently. "It's so very unpleasant getting into the papers, and being told one is a relict with a nephew named Grinn— really I don't know what things are coming to."

"It's annoying," I said, "and I'm sure everyone will be very sorry for you."

"But I don't want anyone to be sorry for me," whimpered Aunt Elizabeth, again overcome.

We had a dreary tea. Nita tried to be playful but I would not respond.

I got away with a book into the garden as soon



as I could. Soon afterwards Nita came out and began picking flowers. As she drifted casually down in my direction I watched her. She is a graceful creature, when one comes to think of it. One can readily understand poor old Bill going crazy over her. I think her special charm is her intense femininity. All her lines are fine and delicate and she stands like an arrow, or like one of those girls, in pictures, carrying vases on their heads. But she is not angular. She flows all over in soft curves when she moves. I watched her as she reached for rose blooms high on the wall, and stood poised for a moment as she listened to something Myra said to her from the open window. I was very much annoyed with her, but it was impossible to feel angry with anything so pretty and so gracious. I meant to have it out with her however, and I did not enjoy the prospect; yet it was somehow a pleasure to feel she was coming nearer and nearer. There is something appealing in all women to me: when they have charm, I mean. I was perfectly aware that Nita knew what she was in for, and that this flower-picking business was her dodge for sidling up to me. I felt I should like to take her and give her two slaps, like a child, and then kiss her and forget all about it, and go on as if nothing had happened.

She knew I was looking at her: I meant her to know; but she pretended to be absorbed in making her nose-gay. Then she suddenly turned and beamed on me like the little rogue she is.

"Come here," I said.

She took no notice for a minute, but seemed intent on completing her posy. Then she sat down on the seat beside me and began coaxing and arranging the blossoms in her hand.

It was quite pleasant, somehow, having her there. I never quite realized till that moment what an appealing sort of woman Nita is. The sunlight hummed with life and slanted in upon her as she sat under the tree; and was reflected from the crimson roses to tint her face, while she was bathed in their scent. I could not feel vexed with such a pretty picture. She knew exactly what was passing in my mind, I swear, as she pulled the blooms into place with a great show of preoccupation while I gazed at her.

"Nita," I said, "why don't you get married?"

"Oh, I've had enough of being married!" said she without looking up.

"Bosh! Don't you believe that; and don't be downhearted."

"No one will have me," she smiled at her flowers.

"That's bosh too; you're fishing for compliments. I know half a dozen."

"Well, I don't want to be, and that's my business, so don't be cheeky, Mr. Thomas. Perhaps the right man hasn't come my way yet."

"How would Bat do? His engagement is off, he tells me."

Nita burst out laughing.

"Oh dear!" she said.

"Well now! Why not?"

"Why," said Nita, "as soon as he married me he'd be off after somebody else—that's why. He even began making up to Myra. He quite annoyed her. I was too many for him," she laughed.

"That's only Bat's fun," I said. "It amuses him."

"Well, it didn't amuse Myra one bit, and I like *men*."

"Don't be down on Bat," I said. "He's a dear old thing: one of the very best. I suppose your standard of manhood has risen since your acquaintance with Mr. Bert Sutherland."

"Don't be spiteful," Nita rejoined. "And remember you've got to send him one of your photographs or I shall be very much annoyed with you."

"I don't care a fig whether you're annoyed with me or not; but I've got something to say to you, lady. I want you to drop this sort of possessive attitude you've taken up of late. We've been good pals, but I don't know why you should act as if I ought to be, and behave, just as you think. I never saw such a woman. You're only a kind of step-niece, and yet if you were my elder sister you could not assume more to yourself. I'm getting fed up with it. You seem to forget, too, that you're extremely rude sometimes."

"I don't mean to be, Thomas. It's because I speak without thinking. I'm always very sorry afterwards."

"Yes, all right; but you go on doing what I object

to, and interfere in things that are no sort of concern of yours. Look what an upset you've brought about with this paragraph in the paper."

"It's not my fault," said Nita pleadingly. "I couldn't stand by and see that poor man made ridiculous. Alfred Williams indeed! Besides, I gave him your name quite right and he wrote it down, and I told him 'Edmund' and not Edward'; and as for 'relict' I never use the word."

"It was obliging of you to make the most of the Alphonse, when you know I detest the name and always sink it."

"You're the vainest man I ever met," said Nita. "You're even ashamed of your own name. Why don't you call yourself 'Dante Gabriel' or something, and have done with it? I am not responsible for your name."

"Well," I said, "I've given you fair warning, so look out."

"Look out for what?"

"What will happen if you don't change your tactics."

"Tactics! What do you mean by 'tactics'? How dare you say a thing like that!"

Her eyes blazed at me. Then she turned away and looked straight in front of her for a moment with a wild terrified expression. Suddenly, she got up and hurried away to the house. As she rose, I heard her say under her breath: "I hate you."

I was absolutely taken aback. I sat as she left me

and felt numb and sick. The girl must be going crazy. What had I said? Nothing at all; I had uttered nothing but a mild, reasoned protest. It was much less than what I had intended to say.

And all this bother has come about from my pulling a fellow out of the water who was drowning because he pretended to be able to swim when he couldn't. If I see Mr. Bert Sutherland I feel I shall let myself go, and give him a swift kick such as will keep him out of the cast of Rosey Posey Limited for reasons that he will not feel inclined to advertise. The fellow, I notice, is represented all over the town by colored posters of some other actor wrapped in a blanket, and squinting down his nose at a banana held in the mouth, which he is trying to light at a carrot. I had no right to interfere with the provisions of the great unknown which had decreed that it was fitting he should die by his own folly. I admit my error. I will make any reparation in my power when opportunity arises, and it will be an unlucky day for Mr. Bert Sutherland when he meets me anywhere alone in the dark. That is how I feel about the matter at this moment.

However, I shall probably never see him again, as I have told Aunt Elizabeth I must be off to pay outstanding visits tomorrow. I can't face any more of the racket. My holiday is being quite spoiled. Nita left her flowers on the seat, and I carried them in and gave them to her. She took them without a word. She looked pale.

She appeared at supper after we were all seated. She was in the blues and no mistake about it. When Ferdinand and I went to the drawing-room after our smoke, she was not there. Myra explained that she had letters to write, but she did not appear again.

## CHAPTER XII

### SINGE WATERBURY'S WAY

**T**HIS morning, before I left, I got a letter from my mother.

"My own dear Son," she begins. She addresses me in this form, I always think, with the idea of disguising from herself that I am not her son.

"MY OWN DEAR SON,

You will be glad, I know, to hear that Mrs. Graham has written to say how delighted they all were with your visit, and she is *most anxious* you should go and stay at Hildon again before your holiday ends. Of course, I wrote and told her that I knew you would be only *too* delighted, so be sure and *write to let her know when to expect you.*"

After touching on one or two home matters the letter ends: "P. S. Have you read of Miss Padlow's engagement !!!"

My mother certainly writes teasing letters. I suppose that repeated touches in the same nerve make

me sensitive: certainly, after reading this over, I felt like a horse maddened by the spur; and yet I know that my mother's intention is to make an insensible appeal, merely, which shall quicken my aspirations and render it easy for me to accept Mrs. Graham's hospitality. It seems to me that she might as well try to make a shy dog fond of the water by repeatedly throwing him into the sea. No one would trouble to tell me of Miss Padlow's engagement, and Mrs. Graham certainly did not write in such terms as those in which my mother expresses her.

Another letter I got this morning was the Double Minute from the office, this time correctly filled in, and it is beside me now completed, with "observations" explaining my prolonged absence. My observations don't read as plausibly as I could wish. The diction demanded in official communications makes it difficult to present one's arguments attractively.

"I have, further, the honor to acquaint you," I write, "that Bank Holiday, falling within the term of my leave, has been deducted by me, as the day is a public holiday enforceable by law, and presumably, cannot be included as one of those working days in respect of which my leave is to be computed."

There is going to be a row, I'm afraid; but, anyhow, they can't make it a serious matter, as I was careful to follow strictly the letter of the rules. It's the wording of the rules that is at fault, and not me.

Yet a third letter I had this morning, but it did



not come by post. It was handed me privately by Myra, who looked at me with great glowing eyes as she gave it to me, and asked me not to open it till I had left Bourncombe. Myra has gradually worked up to the point of treating me like a son. She was warm and intimate in her farewell. It was as though there were some special ground for a confidential understanding between us. Aunt Elizabeth grunted her salutations and told me to mind and not run into the ditch. She thinks it her duty to find pretext for shaking a warning finger at me on all conspicuous occasions. Nita gave me a rather careless good-bye.

The first thing Susan did when we got clear of the place was to drop her silencer, so that it dragged on the road. She did it right in front of a Daimlerful of theatrical ladies, with a "golliwog" on the radiator cap, and I never felt more ashamed in all my life. Susan looks rather a little frump beside these great glittering modern cars. In order to appreciate her properly you want to see her alone.

I slung the silencer up with wire and then got out Myra's letter:—"MY DEAR COUSIN THOMAS," writes the forward girl, "I think you ought to know that Nita is very much troubled at something that passed between you the other evening. She seems to be more sorry for her own part in it than vexed with you, but I think that you must, unintentionally, have hurt her feelings in some way. She is such a dear, and I am so fond of her, that I am sure you will not mind my writing to you. I need hardly say

that Nita has no idea of what I am doing, and would be annoyed with me if she knew. She has not many friends in England, and, naturally, values your friendship, as I happen to know.

Ever yours sincerely,  
M. H."

The way women write letters, that have absolutely no point whatever, is extraordinary. I couldn't make head or tail of this one; it did not tell me anything nor ask anything of me. If Nita is in the dumps it is her own fault, but I am not able to write and tell her so, and cheer her up, because if I did I should give Myra away. Anyhow, I have just written to Myra, and a very nice letter too, considering all I have had to put up with; although I say it.

"DEAR MYRA,

I didn't mind your writing to me a bit. Sorry Nita has got the pip, but she will cheer up again all right. She need not think she is in my black books. Of course she isn't. She is a very good sort, Nita is, and I really don't think anything of what she said, so you had better tell her. Never build yourself a house. The Waterburys have started one, and it seems to be getting on Cousin Jane's nerves. I shall stay here three days if I can stick it. . . ."

Why Lady Jane wants to build, I can't imagine. Langdon Hill is a spacious old house of mellowed

brick gables and ruddy-brown panelling; and you look from the terraced gardens over rolling gorse and heath to Poole Harbor, with Branksea Castle set in the eye of the sun like a picture postcard.

The Waterburys are a quaint couple. They are childless, and live together like brother and sister. Lady Jane found Singe at the American Embassy. Heckfield told me he was popular, and a man who would have gone far if mature Cousin Jane had not twitched him out of his niche, and carried him off to Hampshire to spend his life yachting and otter-hunting with her. Cousin Jane is a real good sort, but voluble and impetuous, and, on occasions, so frank as to embarrass everyone. Her trick of rapping out a cuss-word when excited, I attribute to her having been brought up in her father's stables. She can be truly astonishing. She is a short, sturdy, homely, hard-bitten woman, who never was a beauty, and scorned to pretend she was; but she used to ride as straight as anyone, and still handles the tiller like a man. Her face is rounder and redder every time I see her—she now looks as though she shaved over a bucket in the yard—and, ever since I can remember, she has worn her hair, in defiance of fashions, strained back to a bright, clean, knob behind her head. She used, at one time, to wear in the evenings, as a concession to the amenities of sex, a diamond butterfly, or a bow, perched on this knob.

Just as we drew up at the front door, Singe Waterbury, as large as life, came round the corner of the

house with his easy, spacious, long-limbed air. He was dressed, just as I have always known him, in dark coat and check trousers and shady hat. He stood, when he saw me, with his fingers pushed down into his fobs, rolling a cigar in his wide, genial mouth. Then he took the cigar from his lips and strolled up.

"Well, Cousin," he said, "didn't know you were knocking around here. Statistics worked out—eh? Thought you were the Stores."

I told him I was on a tour.

He made a playful signal with his finger: "Watch me bolt your Cousin Jane out the door," he said.

He went to the entrance and called into the house. "Say, Jane; there's the Stores or something out here." He listened for a moment, then nodded to me. In three seconds Cousin Jane ran out on to the steps. When she saw me she checked and stared.

"How can you be so childish, Singe?" she said, as she came down to greet me.

"I am building a house, Thomas," she explained, "and the Stores have promised to send; but they keep putting off and putting off, although the work is much behind-hand, and the foreman sending away all the sand again, and the men kicking a bucket about instead of attending to their business. However, they have promised to send to-morrow, and I thought you were the man." She turned and clapped her hands and "shoo'd" at Singe, "You old wretch," she said.

"But what have the Stores got to do with it?" I asked, mystified.

"Oh, the Stores do it all!" said Cousin Jane. "You simply tell the Stores, and they have bricks and architects and everything, and it would be no trouble whatever if only the Stores would send. But they won't, and they give me a lot of trouble in consequence. Now where have you come from? Are you staying near by?"

I told her I was on the road from Bourncombe. The old girl tumbled to the idea at once.

"Well, you will stay for a few days, won't you, Thomas? It must be two years since we saw you. I will get you to talk to Mr. Pentland, or whoever it is, when he comes to-morrow; and help me tell the foreman. He is dreadfully obstinate, and Singe is no use at all. He spends all his time with the gardeners."

Cousin Singe had seated himself by my side and he showed me the way round to the stables. Then he took me to the gardens.

He is a man who seems able to spend his whole life resting. I always remember him as strolling about in check trousers; or looking on at an otter hunt; or lying on the deck of a scudding yacht, with his cap tilted over his eyes: yet his thin handsome face is full of fire and energy, though it looks seamed and prematurely old. In point of fact, I have no idea how old he is. He might be any age between forty and sixty. He never seems to have moods, but to be always in a state of meditative enjoyment. He never laughs out, and you don't know exactly when he is serious or

when joking. For some reason he always uses his most mystifying slang when speaking to me.

"Why does Jane want another house?" I asked him as we walked along the Terrace.

"'f you get into close cauc's with her, Cousin, she'll let out her squeak all right, and after that you'll know less than you do now. We shan't bide there." He shook his head, and looked at me. Then he stopped and took his cigar out of his mouth.

"You English don't appreciate your own country," he said. "For business—well, I like America; but for play—holiday-time!" He threw out his hands. "I tell you, Cousin, I stand here—yes, after fifteen years—and it melts me every time. We'd go fair crazy in th' States 'f we could wave a thing like this. It's beyond price. Look at that house! Four hundred years it's stood there—and history hustling along all the time—four hundred years! Think of it! And those bricks yonder! It takes centuries of sunlight to put on a color like that, and you English would tear 'em down and pitch 'em into the sea soon as not. Look at these old stones on the wall where you're sitting: think of the generations of your race that have leant upon them, and all the pretty English girls that have looked out yonder to your English Channel in the sunset, and had love made to them, sitting just where you're hunched now. You folks don't understand these things, Cousin. When you've been out of the country for two—three generations—they all come back and roost with you. That's so."

"But that's exactly why I can't understand Cousin Jane wanting another house," I told him.

"Well, Thomas, your cousin's not been very well lately," he said, as we walked from the garden into a woodland path, where the ruddy boles of the fir trees stood knee-deep among the bracken. "Jane's fretting for the vote. She's getting turrible logical. She finished with 'Why should the man who blacks my boots, vote' long way back. She's used up that old stunt, and quotes John Stuart Mill now. I don't argue it. I just sniff my nose, and I say, right out loud, women ought to vote; they ought to be encouraged to vote; let them have two votes if they want—three, if they're set for it."

"*Three* votes!"

"Sure."

"But why?"

"High Politics."

"I don't understand," I said. "What are High Politics?"

"Well, Cousin, it isn't the voting that hurts, is it?" He said over his shoulder as he walked on before me: "It's counting the votes. Well, don't count! That's what they call High Politics, and I guess they are so. It's what the niggers get in th' States."

"But I don't see why wanting a vote should make Cousin Jane build a house," I said.

"No, Cousin? Well, as I say, your Cousin Jane is getting turrible logical. She needs to have something to pacify her, and if old Bill Dawson, the fore-

man, is going to do it for her, well—that suits—hey?” He turned and looked at me gravely. He’s an odd chap. Then he said:

“You’re not going to get married, Cousin—are you?”

“No,” I said.

“No. Well, you’re a wise cousin. You stay right there, Thomas. Don’t quit. Keep your shoulders square, and if a girl blows a kiss, just rubber around at the chimney-pots. When you see one coming down the side-walk hike across the street right away. You just keep busy, so, until you feel good and safe, and then—they’ll crawl up the vent flues to get at you while you’re saying your prayers.” He walked before me down the narrow path.

“I know you’re joking,” I said, “but I don’t find that girls throw themselves at one—except,” I added, as I remembered little Nibbs, “when I don’t like them.”

Singe stopped again and turned round.

“Sure,” he said. “It’s so, Cousin. If you want a pretty girl come jump into your lap—don’t observe her, Thomas. Don’t recollect what she’s for; just go and ask her the time and make a quick get away. Soap her up that way, Cousin, and in a week you may wear her in your hat like a feather. It’s right here,” he broke off.

“The new house?”

“Sure.”

“I should like to see it,” I said.



"Spy round, Cousin, and you'll see all there is. Way down yonder. I'm shy. I'm waiting. Guess they'll whistle me before the flag goes up. You'll see a clearing and a near-by shack." He strolled slowly on.

A hundred yards or so brought me to a crescent of open ground cleared at the margin of the wood, and here I found myself on the scene of operations. The walls were beginning to go up; at one point scaffold poles had been erected, and brick, timber, and the builder's sheds were scattered near and far. There was not much to see, and I soon rejoined Cousin Singe.

"It's going to be a fine big house," I said.

He walked on before me without reply.

After dinner the plans were laid out for my inspection. They were wonderfully drawn on thick, oily, transparent paper, which had such a strange, piercing, rancid smell that it was necessary to move the table near to the open window. Cousin Jane, with a potpourri jar before her and her handkerchief to her nose, told me she could never study the plans as she wished owing to the nausea caused by this smell. She complained of the Stores for sending her such plans, and it certainly did seem unnecessary.

The drawings were inscribed: "House for Lady Jane Waterbury. Design No. 2721, of the Universal Stores, Ltd. Mr. William Wordsworth, Director of Sanitation, Architecture, and Building."

"You will see plain, Cousin," said Singe, who had moved up behind us, "that old man Wordsworth has pegged out a new claim."

"Oh, do go away, Singe!" cried his wife.

"This design, Cousin," Singe went on, pointing with his cigar, "was webbed by the Stores. Those old women, who come out at six o'clock and throw damp sawdust into the upturned bottoms of our trousers, have all had a dab at it; like stirring the Christmas pudding."

"Singe! Do leave us alone."

Cousin Singe moved off "out the window," as he would say, and the plans were explained to me in detail. I don't, however, understand plans, and I could not make my impressions of the actual building agree with what was shown in the drawings.

"The house looks much bigger on the ground than it does on paper," I said.

"They always do, I believe," Cousin Jane told me. "The men scatter things about so, and dig holes to such an extent that I have really given up trying to follow the work. The walls, however, will be going up soon, and then we shall see."

The next morning Cousin Jane carried me off with her "to help tell the foreman." She explained that there was no regular contract because that would have meant delays. No! There was, instead, a schedule of prices, so that when the house was built the Stores could come and count the bricks and measure the roof and then you paid the Stores for whatever you had had *a la carte*, so to speak, and it

was a great mercy if only the Stores would send.

She gave a cry of satisfaction when we came to the place. She had not been to the site for several days, she told me, and had no idea that things were getting on so fast.

When I set my eyes on the long lines of brickwork rising from the ground and the widespread activity of the scene, and recalled the plan Cousin Jane had shown me, I felt puzzled. A man came out of an office like a bathing-hut, and touched his sunburnt straw "panama" respectfully.

I could see a desk with drawings on it in this foreman's office, and while the man followed Cousin Jane down a planked gangway, I slipped in to have a look at them.

They were plans right enough, and they were duly inscribed as the Stores design No. 2712 for Lady Jane, and the poet's name gave authority to them; but I could not recognize them. I don't understand plans and I felt lost. Then, in a flash, I got hold of the idea.

I hurried out. We were evidently going to have some excitement and I didn't want to miss anything. The sun shone; the ringing trowels made an almost continuous chorus; a traction engine was snorting on the road behind me with a load of bricks; a steam engine was running a mill to mix the mortar, and the whole concern working to perfection. What would Cousin Jane do! It was a nightmare. I hoped and prayed that it would not fall to my lot to tell her

what was happening. I hurried down to the place where Cousin Jane had already entered on her task of telling the foreman.

"Well," said Cousin Jane as I joined them. "You're beginning to get along now, I'm glad to see."

"The brickwork soon goes up after the footings are in, m'lady."

The foreman spoke in slow level tones, and drawled a little when Lady Jane showed impatience.

"So I see, and you've got nice dry weather."

"Bit too dry, m'lady."

"Well, we need not mind about that just now, if you please, Dawson," Cousin Jane said impetuously. "It will dry the mortar quickly, that's what I was thinking of."

"Bit too quick, m'lady. Takes me all my time to keep the work wet."

"My good man, I want the house *dry*. Can't you understand that? I particularly told the person the Stores sent—— Tell that man not to throw water on the bricks."

"I know my business, m'lady; he's doing what he's been told," said Dawson respectfully.

"Well, I shall complain to Mr. Wordsworth, Dawson, if you persist in refusing to obey orders. Someone is coming down to-day and it will have to be understood that the bricks are to be kept dry. . . . Tell me: Why does that bit stick out like that?"

"That'll be the drawing-room gable, m'lady."

"Dining-room you mean, I think. What comes over?"

"The big day nursery, m'lady."

"NURSERY! Really, Dawson! The big spare room, you mean."

"Maybe I do, m'lady; one name's as good as another for me. It's not my business what names they call them by."

"It doesn't seem right, it all comes too far this way somehow."

"The house is set out quite correct, m'lady; Mr. Grindle he came and measured and made a mark with the toe of his boot, he did, just so, same as I do now—I knows he did, though; and after I had it all pegged out, Mr. Boot he came down and checked it every bit, he did, and it wasn't that much out anywhere, m'lady."

The foreman measured off the top joint of his finger with his thumb and held it up for the inspection of Lady Jane.

"Who's Mr. Boot? Was it him I saw here when I said where the house was to go?"

"No, m'lady, that wouldn't be Mr. Boot; he's one of the setters-out. It would likely be one of the canvassers, Mr. Gorge or Mr. Rinse; they're all about they are, both on 'em."

"Well, Mr. Pentland will be down to-day, and he will know all about it."

"No, m'lady, Mr. Pentland's one of the measurers. He'd get into trouble if *he* meddled."

"*No one knows.* Really, it's hopeless. Why doesn't Mr. Wordsworth come down and see to things? How

on earth am I to be sure that everything is right?"

"Oh, it's all right, m'lady, I'll see to that; why, Mr. William Wordsworth couldn't tell you. He's all for signing papers and the like, Mr. William Wordsworth is."

"It's really disgraceful," Cousin Jane said to me, growing peppery. "I trust to the Stores, and they do absolutely nothing. Oh yes! If you want a thing done, do it yourself, of course. Nice for me—that doesn't matter—— Oh dear, no. Well now. Show me! Dawson, go on in front! I want to see everything. Show me! Which is the front door?"

"Along o' here, m'lady."

"*There!*"

"Yes, m'lady, this here."

"But it's *wrong!*"

"No, m'lady."

"But I say it is wrong, Dawson. Oh, damn the Stores—— Thomas, they've been and made the front door open into the kitchen!"

"This a'n't the kitchen," Dawson drawled in a high-pitched note of despair. "This here's the lounge, m'lady. The kitchens are over yonder, along o' that stack of poles."

"There! Why, that's the stables—why, they're building them on to the house. Whoever heard of such a thing!—I won't have it.—Tell the men to leave off.—The stables are to be separate.—Why, it's *all* wrong.—Where are the plans? The plans, quick! Get the plans, Dawson."

The foreman walked off philosophically with a wry glance at me, and Cousin Jane hurried down to a point where she could view the south front of the building. I saw her throw out her hands. She returned to meet the foreman, who spread the drawings out on a pile of bricks.

"You've brought the wrong ones."

"These are the only plans I've got, m'lady."

Lady Jane stared at them, then she stared at me. She grew crimson. Suddenly her glance traveled beyond me, over my shoulder.

"Who is that man—is he Mr. Pentland?"

The foreman looked attentively under his hand at a figure which was approaching down the Clearing. *The Stores had Sent.*

"No, m'lady, that won't be Pentland; that'll be Wedge."

"What, another! Ask him to come here. I want to speak to him at once."

The Stores had sent Mr. Wedge in a black frock coat, straw hat and white satin tie, and he looked a bit exotic among the fir trees. He carried an umbrella and brown attaché case in one hand, and in the other, like a symbol of rank, a pair of abortive gloves. He raised his hat, without looking at us, in an ambiguous way, as though he did not wish to commit himself, but meant us to decide for ourselves whether he was saluting or merely ventilating his head. Cousin Jane evidently concluded that he was ventilating his head. He went into the hut, where we could see him twice

lick the palm of his hand and smooth his hair with it, and arrange his tie in the foreman's scrap of looking-glass, and pull down his cuffs. He came out into the sunlight and walked towards us. He was a slim pale young man, and as he approached he raised his hat again and ventured to beam a little.

"Getting on, your ladyship, I'm glad to see."

"Yes: with the wrong house."

"Something wrong, your ladyship?"

"Tell him, please."

"M'lady says as what it's a wrong 'un, Mr. Wedge."

"Eh? Speak clear, Dawson; what are you talking about?"

"Theres been a slip," I put in.

"Oh well, Dawson will see to that; what slip is it, please?"

"The Stores have delivered the wrong goods," I said.

"Ah yes? They can be returned, of course. What do you refer to, please?"

"The House."

"Beg pardon?"

"It's the wrong one."

"Do I—you say the house is wrong?"

"Oh no; there's no complaint about the house. It seems a splendid house—so far as one can see."

Mr. Wedge smiled and bowed acknowledgments on behalf of the Stores. "But you say there is something wrong, I understand?"

"Yes."



"May I ask——?"

"It's the wrong house."

"The wrong *house*?"

"Yes."

"The *wrong* house?"

"Yes."

"You mean different from what was ordered?"

"Quite so."

"You say all this concrete and brickwork won't fit?"

"Yes."

"Then it's the wrong house altogether, you mean?"

"Exactly."

Mr. Wedge gazed at me blankly, and then stared at the plans. His lips formed the words of "wrong house" as though he were trying to fix the idea in his mind. Then he soliloquised with a long pause for meditation between each utterance, while we stood silent, and the foreman tilted his hat over his eyes and scratched his head.

"I don't know anything about this."

"I'm sure I don't know at all what Mr. William Wordsworth will say when he hears about it. The wrong house! Ah!"

"Mr. William Wordsworth has signed the plans; he must know all about it, that's certain."

"I should say, if you were to arst *me*, there's been a sort of mistake somewhere or other—a bit of a misunderstanding, as you may say."

At this point the foreman broke in.

"It's been and done now, though, arn't it, Mr. Wedge?"

"As Dawson points out, the house is already a good way towards being half built," said Wedge. "If it is wrong it ought to have been mentioned beforehand. We don't take responsibility when a thing is not mentioned beforehand. It's one of our rules. I expect that is what Mr. William Wordsworth will say when he hears."

Lady Jane, who had been standing by with her back turned, here spun round.

"No one cares a twopenny damn about your rules," she blurted, "nor what Mr. Wordsworth may say; I ordered a house, and I won't have anyone else's. This has all got to be pulled down and taken away. Then start fresh. Begin now."

A long argument began, in the course of which Mr. Wedge discovered among his papers the letter Lady Jane had written when she ordered the house. He laid it before her with an air of noble forbearance.

*"Sunday."*

#### THE STORES.

Lady Jane Waterbury will take the house No. 2712 and it is to begin at once. She does not want any contract, but the work is to be done under a shedule (can't spell it) as the Stores suggest. She will be glad to hear how soon the work can begin and when it will be finished.'

What had happened was that the design intended by Cousin Jane was numbered "two seven twenty-

one," but she had described it as "two seven twelve." She had copied "twelve," however, from a Stores letter, and the whole thing resolved itself into the mistake of a typist, who had written "twelve" instead of "twenty-one." The great William had imperishably confirmed the error with his momentous signature: "one house Lady Jane Waterbury, No. 2712," had been put into the slot, so to speak, at the Stores, and its huge mechanism had been automatically thrown into action. The whole blame clearly lay with the typist.

The dispute was still vigorous when I stole away, and Mr. Wedge was beginning to get a bit haughty. Cousin Jane, in the frenzy of debate, had expressed a desire to disembowel Mr. William Wordsworth.

I hurried to the house, packed my things, brought Susan round to the front and then went to say good-bye to Cousin Singe.

When I gently told him what had happened, he looked at me fixedly, his face became crimson and swelled alarmingly, and his eyes filled with tears. He frightened me for a moment, and then I knew, by a faint pulsing of his chest, that Singe had broken the habit of years and was enjoying a hearty laugh. He stared at me in silence, and only responded to my "good-bye" by dribbling at the mouth. I was anxious not to meet Cousin Jane again and hurried off to Susan. He followed me with his fingers thrust into his fobs, and stood gazing at me while I wound her up. Just as I was getting into the seat he spoke :

"What did you say?" I asked.

"Covered by insurance," he blurted.

"How do you mean? How could it be insured?" I asked.

He shook his head, while a happy tear ran unheeded down the side of his nose. "Nunk! I keep your *cousin* insured. You never know where a suffragist may bog you."

I saw Cousin Jane approaching from the distance, and as I put in the gears he shouted again.

"'f you ever change your mind, Cousin, take out a full Wife policy for Mrs. Quinn—'Domestic Benefits Limited, Broadway, N' York.'" He nodded again, with his neck bursting; and so I left him.

The drive sweeps through the park in a wide loop, and as I approached the lodge gate I caught a glimpse, through the trees, of Singe Waterbury executing complicated manœuvres on the lawn, with remarkable agility and sprightliness. In another flash I saw Cousin Jane busily working the pump of the gardener's watering-tank.

## CHATER XIII

### MY ONLY DUKE BECOMES A TOTAL LOSS

**I**T is no good having a duke at all if you let him drop. There are only a couple of dozen of them and it makes them precious. That is why I looked up my duke. It is no good waiting for your duke to look *you* up. They won't be bothered.

The particular tie between me and my duke is that he shot me. He blew a bit out of my leg; in fact, I don't thank the duke that I have any leg except a celluloid one, which, though it is the next best thing to one's own, has the drawback of being explosive. I have rather to thank my lucky stars.

I find it an awkward business alluding to my duke at all. You must hide your duke under a bushel. If you even let him peep out, however coyly, your audience will suppose you are trying to slog them with your precious duke, and they will resent him, and you. The fact is that everybody is so well aware of snobbish aspirations that they dare not mention a duke, if they have one, for fear of revealing their snobbishness, and are indignant at the assurance of anyone else who has the hardihood to do so. It is almost impossible for a

commoner to experience the radiance of a duke and not become at once either a vulgarian or a snob. To discredit the sublimity of the ducal state, as I am doing now, is vulgar. It is, of course, the impulse of one who is trying to reconcile himself to having lost his duke—as I have. On the other hand, no commoner can exist in that radiance unless he consents to fill his allotted notch and defer to rank; and as he can find the gratification which induces him to do this only in a mean admiration for mean ideals, he is a confessed snob. A duke makes radicals out of the vulgarians and Tories out of the snobs. A duke squirts out radicals as a by-product of dukedom much as a locomotive blows cinders into the air, but he can always make conservatives by touching his hat.

There is one man I know who is entirely superior to snobbishness. He is as unconscious of snobbish aspirations as he is of the flow of blood in his veins. He has an admiration for rank, and collects experiences of the higher aristocracy with the simplicity of a child collecting shells from the beach; and recounts his adventures in the belief that what is of such interest to him will interest others. He has no idea of vaunting his swell acquaintances. If a lord informs him that he thinks it will rain, Reggie Bage feels the opinion, from such a source to be so weighty that he will tell you impressively, "The Marquis of Kennington said to me just now that the weather is going to change." The result of all this is that Reggie gets shot at.

I was in the smoking-room of the Club one day when he pushed open the glazed doors and stood looking round the room.

"Well, and how's the duke, Reggie?" Dick Bannerman called out cheerily, across the floor.

*"What duke?"*

*"Any duke!"*

When I left Cousin Singe practising first exercises in apoplexy on his front drive I had no idea where I was going to fill up the three days before I was due at Hildon. My chief need was to get somewhere quick so that I could begin to enjoy the joke of Lady Jane and the Stores without loss of time. A joke like that must be shared. I hadn't had a proper laugh over it. Finally I turned Susan in the direction of Compton Barns. Lord Heckfield always laughs at Lady Jane, and I had barely forty miles to go to reach him.

In order to disarm hostility I may mention, in confessing to an acquaintance with Lord Heckfield, that he is the second Viscount only, and that he and my father were brother officers and close friends long before his father was raised to the Peerage. Lord Heckfield became my guardian after my father's death. Our friendship may therefore be ascribed to physical coincidences and not to family connection or social eminence on my part, and I hope that these circumstances will exculpate me, and remove any impression that I am dragging in Heckfield for the purpose of making a display of him. He always treats me

as if I were an absurdity. What the idea is, I don't know, but he refuses to take me seriously. He stutters a little and suffers, with his advancing years, from asthma. I found him ill, but I was shown into the library where the old fellow, for he is beginning to get old, was sitting in an invalid-chair, beautifully tailored as usual, with a dense atmosphere of cigarette smoke and a medicine-bottle and glass at his elbow.

"Well, you're a nice chap, dropping out of the clouds like this! Why didn't you say you were coming? You'll kill all your friends by giving them these sudden joys."

When I had given him an account of Lady Jane's house, he said:

"You're a terrible fellow! You ought to be sorry for your unfortunate cousin. Where's your gallantry? Did it happen to-day?"

"Three hours ago."

He laughed and gasped.

"You shouldn't come here making me ill. Go and tell the Duke, they've got a small party at Yend. He hates Lady Jane—declares she stuck him over a horse."

He insisted on coming to the door to see me off, and seemed dazzled at the spectacle of Susan equipped for touring.

I told him the scheme of my tour.

"You graceless young ruffian!" he said, suffocating again. "I must go in. Good-bye. Sorry I can't ask you to stop."



Yend was only fifteen miles off and I thought I would risk it. I felt at the moment quite equal to keeping my end up in the crowd there if I were asked to stay. The Duchess is an American, very off-hand and a little lacking in dignity, perhaps; and the Duke, who is a good deal older than she, is genial, and easygoing, and very popular with all his dependants. He bears the responsibilities of his rank lightly, and takes no part in public affairs beyond lending his patronage in local matters. He and his Duchess will go through a bazaar like a couple of bluebottle flies: you can hear them buzzing, and in half an hour their job is done and they are off again.

I entered the park by a lodge I did not know, and found myself approaching the Castle from the back. I was pulling up to get my bearings near some out-buildings when, as luck would have it, the Duke himself came round a corner with a keeper and two couple of terriers.

"Who? Who?" he asked, pointing at me with his stick. "I shot you!—*Quinn!* Quinn, of course! How's your leg?"

"As good as ever."

"I'm very glad to hear that. Coming up? I'll get in. I've been on my feet all day. Where do you hail from?"

"Well, you must join us for a day or two," he said, when I told him. "We don't go north till next week. Bring the car round here."

We stopped at a side-door, where a servant was

put in charge of Susan, and I followed my host down corridors and across a vast, stone vaulted, modern Gothic hall which, like the front entrance, resembles part of a church, and looks as if it had been designed to strike a chill to the heart and attune the mind to the cold state of dukedom. We went to a drawing-room or boudoir, also with church windows, which were incongruously fitted with gilded poles and heavy curtains, where the Duchess and a number of other ladies were playing cards in an atmosphere of mingled cigarettes and roses.

"There you are! Was it a good bag, Frank?"

"Seventy-four brace. You remember Mr. Quinn? he's staying to-night."

"How do you do, Mr. Quinn? Glad you're joining us," said her Grace, glancing up to shake hands. "Whose shout? We shall meet again later on." She smiled dismissal, and I followed her husband to the billiard-room. This was a huge place with an enormous stone mantelpiece carved and blazoned with the arms of the great house. Half a dozen men were sitting at ease in their shooting-clothes, while others were coming from the adjoining gun-room. Two of my host's brothers, Lord Richard and Lord John, I knew. The others were strangers.

There was low-toned talk and a general tendency to stretch legs. A small clean-cut man, a Captain Romer, called by everyone Freddy, chatted and laughed gaily. Everyone else seemed tired except the Duke, who fizzed out of the room. After about an hour of

this someone began practising billiard shots, walking slowly about the table, and the click of the balls helped to put us all to sleep. Thirty minutes later general yawning began, and the men got out of their chairs and slowly dispersed. Captain Romer came over to me and said, "The Duke peppered you, they tell me."

"Yes. Got me in the leg."

"Bad?"

"No. But it took a bit clean out of my calf. It looks, now, as if someone had had a bite off me."

"By Jove! Clean out, you say?"

We were away at the side of the room, the others were drifting out, and my leg interests and gives pleasure to all who see it. It makes it rather a special show—being a duke's job. It is a thoroughly popular exhibition, and I pulled down my stocking for Freddy to have a look.

"It's one of the queerest things I ever saw," he said, complimenting me as he stooped forward in his chair. At that moment the Duke walked in through the gun-room door just behind us. I did not know it was he till I heard his voice. Luckily he could not, I think, have seen what I was doing.

"Here, Dick, look after Quinn, will you? He doesn't know his room," he said to his brother, and went out again. Freddy laughed shrilly and walked off. It was annoying. After all, to all intents and purposes, Freddy asked to see it. You can't possibly refuse when a fellow asks to be allowed to look at your leg. It would be "selfish," as Nita calls it.

A servant led the way to my room.

My things had all been laid out in due order as though I were a "quick-change artiste," with the shirt opened and the links and studs in place, but when I wanted my trousers I couldn't find them. There was a break in the orderly rank along the edge of the bed. I searched in the wardrobe and chest of drawers, but without result, and then rang the bell. They had evidently unpacked the whole of my luggage and stowed the things away. I went through all the cupboards and drawers a second time in vain. No one had answered the bell. I rang again, and in a sort of perplexity I opened the door and peeped out with some vague hope of rescue. The man was standing on the mat outside. Down the corridor I could see two others doing sentinel in the same way.

"I can't find my trousers."

The valet came in, looked at the bed, and glanced round the room.

"I will inquire, sir," he said, and he bowed and left me. While I was awaiting his return I read again the card which was thrust centrally into the frame of my looking-glass.

*Yend Castle.*

*Dinner.*

*August 9th.*

MR. THOMAS QUINN  
to take in

THE HON. MILDRED TICH-GOWER.

I thought of Mildred and wondered whether she were thinking of me. No doubt she had a ticket

stuck into her glass too. She had never seen me! How exciting for Mildred! I might, for all she knew, be HE! *Was I HE?* I felt a bit interested myself. I was glad she could not see me; I never look my best in sock suspenders. How far had Mildred got? I wondered. I kissed my hand towards the west, which was the direction in which I judged Mildred to be. I could picture her comparing different colored gowns against her bosom, and blushing at herself—a wonderful moment in the life of a young girl, and all on my account. Mildred must be fair or she would have some other name—a washed-out sort of fairness, but I don't mind that if, as Bat says, they are "nice and dainty." Dear Mildred! I was all impatience to see her. But I was getting much more impatient to see my trousers. I was uneasy. Time was short. At last I put on a dressing-gown and looked out into the corridor. No one was in sight, but almost immediately my man appeared following Lord Richard down the passage.

His lordship was in full evening dress, with the exception that he was wearing the striped green and violet trousers of a pyjama suit.

He is a tall, elegant-looking man, with a toy moustache, and he never shows more than the faint glimmer of a smile on his impassive face. He has a way of holding up his chin and speaking with restrained murmuring lips, which makes him appear to be carrying a spoonful of wine about in his mouth.

"I am afraid the ladies have taken them," he

mumbled, looking at me placidly. "We are wearing these," he added, lowering his lids to indicate his trousers. After glancing at me again, with a dim suggestion of a smile, he nodded and walked off.

It promised to be what they considered a gay evening, evidently; but I heartily wished, when I put on my pyjamas, that they had chosen another evening for this particular joke. I did not at all relish a first introduction to the ladies in the dress I saw reflected in my glass. Apart from any other consideration, my pyjamas seemed too short, and they did not hang well. I had never noticed it before, but they did not appear to fit and made my legs look crooked. Mildred would not like me so, I knew. Lord Richard's must have been made of silk, and by a tailor. I tried some blue cheviot trousers, turned up and ironed at the bottoms, but the result was impossible. Mildred would have taken a violent dislike to me. It was clear that pyjama-legs was the proper garment in which to carry off the joke; for I supposed it was meant as a joke. Then I had a splendid idea. Sinbad the Sailor! I got out his drawers. I had noticed where they had been put away and I was into them in a moment. They are of lemon-colored sateen, buttoning round the angle and growing properly baggy as you go upwards. They looked superb. I should be the best-dressed man in the company and Mildred would be delighted. The only defect was that they were so voluminous below the waist that they made my coat-tails stand out and show a lemon "V" insertion at a back view. I tried putting

my coat-tails inside, but decided that Mildred would prefer that I did not. I should have to be careful to avoid turning my back on her, that was all. It was the best I could do, anyhow, and time was up. I left my room at the stroke of eight o'clock, feeling like a bather in dread of a chilly plunge.

I encountered no one in my journey to the great landing. The place was vast and arcaded like a cathedral. The stone vaulting went towering up above me to a sort of Gothic skylight. I would undertake to drive Susan up the wide, shallow flight of stairs. The uncarpeted stone was flanked with a heavy pierced balustrade, like the parapet of a church, and at every turn great bosky, heraldic lions, carved in stone, shouldering pikes, and with crowns on their heads, protruded curly tongues at me. The Duchess told me once that these stairs were a great resource, and that they had toboggan races on tea-trays down them to help out Christmas; but the place seemed to me oppressive to the point of being inhuman. I felt no more than three feet high as I crept alone down the vast cloistered flights, vividly aware of Sinbad's lemon drawers and of my coat-tails cocking out behind me. And then I caught a whiff. Yes! There was no mistake about it! It was a smell of cooking! It was gone in a moment, but it had been like a ray of sunlight, and I took heart. The bottom seemed to fall out of the whole ducal fabric at that touch of nature. I felt reassured.

When I reached the foot of the stairs I noticed a

group of servants standing to one side as though the whole establishment were waiting on my appearance. They observed me, without looking at me, with grave respect. Apparently guests always came down to dinner cocktailed and in Arabian drawers. It made me ill at ease. What I wanted was sympathy. A loud swelling, medley of clashing bell-sounds filled the vast building with a soft din. I began to feel scared. I was not prepared for such solitary state.

"Which room is it?" I asked; and I shivered.

One of the men stepped briskly forward with a bow, and led the way to a door which he held open for me. As I entered I glanced aside and saw one of the group turn to his fellows. I could clearly discern the wink in the back of his head, and see it reflected in the rigid countenances of the others who stared past him. It was a small matter, but it cheered me at the moment I entered the room.

I found myself in the brilliantly lighted salon of the Castle. It was a huge apartment. At the further end I could see a dozen splendidly dressed women, variously grouped and talking pleasantly together; but not a single man was present.

I had been done brown and no mistake. It was evidently a conspiracy to get me to appear, unknown, before all these great ladies in my pyjamas. My anger luckily kept me up to the scratch. I advanced resentfully down the room. Some of the ladies glanced towards me casually. Others did not appear to observe my entrance. Then suddenly a lovely figure



broke from a group near the fireplace and stepped gaily towards me.

"Well, how do you do, again, Mr. Quinn?" said the Duchess, looking me steadily in the eyes with her own very bright and sparkling ones. "I couldn't talk to you this afternoon. It was so very critical, but we won the rubber, and the next too. Where have you last come from?"

The Duchess does not speak like an American exactly, but there is a strongly personal note in her speech, as though she had been taught the English manner of utterance very carefully by the best masters. It is a sort of sticky, clicking enunciation, and is rather fascinating.

"They're building a house," she was continuing, after I had answered her question, when her attention seemed to wander, and her glance travelled past me towards the end of the room.

I turned and saw an impressive sight indeed. A group of nine men in evening dress and gaudy pyjama legs straggled negligently into the room and gradually distributed themselves among the ladies. There was no laughter, nor any particular sign of amusement. The men, generally, had an air of being mildly bored and a little too much at their ease for good manners. Some of their night fits were no better than my own. The Duchess's eye flashed briefly from one to the other, and then she left my side in one of her characteristic rapid movements and addressed some serious questions to Freddy (who goes in for pink sleeping-

suits) about the recovery of a gun, which, it seemed, had been dropped overboard at the ferry.

"Will you introduce me to Miss Mildred Tich-Gower?" I said when I could get the chance. "I'm taking her in."

"She's over here," and her Grace led the way through a throng adorned with very bright eyes and dazzling costumes. All the women were young in style, if not in years, and there was a lot of electricity about, certainly; but one could not detect any special gaiety. Mildred did not appear to notice Sinbad's beautiful drawers at all, but she could not hide a certain mischievousness lurking in her gray eyes when I looked into them at short range. She turned and nodded to me as if she knew me when the Duchess mentioned my name. She was quite a charmer: tall, slim, with a short delicate nose, a lifted lip, and animated gray eyes. She was fair, of course, and wore her hair across her forehead in a wide swathe like a turban, and fastened over the temple with a great diamond buckle in a most disquieting fashion. On the whole, I thought I had got the pick of the bevy.

I moment later the Duke fizzed into the room with quick steps, a little vexed at being late, and made straight for one of the elder ladies and bore her off. His dress alone was complete: they had spared *his* trousers; and I could see by the sudden surprised glances he shot about him that he was not in the secret. As he passed near me he glanced at my legs, and then

at me, in a baffled way, and I saw his partner squeeze his arm.

When we were seated at dinner the joke was safely out of mind below the table. It was a delightful meal. The talk was gay, and traveled up and down the table with a happy absence of the two-birds-on-a-perch arrangement of some dinner-parties I have attended, where each man has his lady allotted to him, and has got to make the best he can of her. There was a good deal of fun at Freddy's corner, but we only got stray reports of it down at our end. The food was lovely, and there was not too much of it, and no time was wasted. In this way I lost a delicious morsel of asparagus iced in a parmesan sauce, which was snatched away at a moment when I had laid down my fork to show Mildred, with a pellet of bread, how the thimble-rigger secretes the pea. Before I knew it, it had gone from me for ever—a moment never to be recaptured this side the grave.

Mildred confided to me that she likes to have a bit "on," and knows a bookie or two, it seems. She is a dear girl. She is not in the least racy. She seemed as though she had stepped, in disguise, out of a convent for the occasion. She impressed me as a quiet looker-on at life with just this spark of a passion for spotting the winner. She pointed out her mother, who seemed nearly as young as she did herself. In fact, we became quite thick. I got really fond of Mildred, but I did not speak to her after I bowed her from the table that night, and I suppose we shall never meet again. Such

is life! And Mildred! How is it with you, dear?

It was quite a shock to see the incongruous flash of colored garments above the table when the men rose in compliment to the retiring ladies. We looked inexpressibly foolish at that moment. While seated, we duly set off, in our masculine way, the perfections the ladies displayed; but when they expanded their fuller glories by standing, the inadequacy of the men to dignify the moment was grotesque. I could see the Duchess bite her lip and turn her head, and a momentary disturbance was to be noticed in many faces.

When the door closed our countenances relaxed into broad smiles.

"Whose little game is this?" said the Duke. "It looks like Dot. You've all played up to it well. Where do you get your pyjamas, Quinn? That's the way they should be made—plenty of room and buttoned round the ankle."

I told him it was part of a fancy dress.

"Has Waterbury been giving a fancy-dress ball? He could go as he is. Has he taken his hands out of his pockets yet? Move up this end."

Here was my opening and I made the most of it. The story was quite a success. The Duke was delighted, and the other men amused. Lord Richard was even in serious difficulties to avoid spilling his spoonful.

"Don't let's join the ladies," he murmured to his brother. "Let's shift to the billiard-room and have the cards there. They'll come after us—see if they don't."

"Yes; yes; it'll be a lesson to 'em," said the Duke. Here, Foster"—and he gave orders to a servant.

When we got to the billiard-room the tables were set out. Two men played billiards, and the rest of us sat down to bridge. I was cut with Lord John against the Duke and Freddy Romer.

"What stakes?" I asked a little nervously.

"Oh, anything you like," the Duke said, considerately. "Half a crown a hundred?"

"Better make it half a sov.," Lord John put in rather quickly. "Easier to add up. Suit you?" he asked.

I nodded, consoling myself with the reflection that it would be all right if I won. In point of fact I won thirty-four half-sovereigns that night, a pleasure which, however, involved me in the duty, later in the evening, of receiving a ten-pound note from the Marchioness of Darlingford and giving her six pounds ten in exchange for it. I don't like these transactions with ladies, and I would much rather have cried "quits" and given the Marchioness five bob out of my own pocket into the bargain, if that would have added anything to her pleasure.

I felt very much above myself when I sat down, what with the success of Sinbad's drawers and the glow of my exploits as a *raconteur*, and the first time I shuffled I managed to get all the queens safely out of the pack. I wish I hadn't done it now.

When these cards were dealt Lord John went "two no trumps," Freddy having previously bid two dia-

monds. The Duke led ace, king, and then the ten, and looked surprised when Freddy threw a small one instead of planking on the queen and making good the three other diamonds in his hand. My partner then went ahead with clubs and Freddy and the Duke looked at one another oddly when the latter omitted to put the queen on the knave. The next round he threw away.

"Having none?"

"Then you've revoked," Lord John said to the Duke. "You hold the queen."

But the Duke said he hadn't got it.

"It must have been thrown with another card," he added, and he counted the cards in the tricks on the table.

They were quite correct.

"On the floor?"

No! There was no card on the floor.

"The pack must be short," said Freddy, counting his cards.

We all did the same.

Freddy was perfectly right. There were only forty-eight cards. We all looked at one another dumb-founded; at least *they* did. I had begun to see that I was making a fearful ass of myself.

"Count again," said the Duke. "The pack's only just been opened."

"No," I said, "here they are." And I produced the four queens from my breast pocket.

They stared.

"I took them out when I shuffled," I said.

No one seemed to understand me.

"It was a joke," I explained.

They still stared in astonishment.

"I often do it," I said, "and no one ever notices. This is the first time anyone has found out that the queens are missing until the tricks are counted."

They all looked puzzled, while I tried to appear as cheerful as possible. Then Freddy broke silence with a cackle of laughter. One of them, anyhow, had seen the joke.

"Come on," said Lord John. "Start fresh," and he tore the score-sheet off the block and marked a fresh one.

They are a bit too exclusive in their ideas of a joke at Yend Castle, I think.

It was close on eleven o'clock before the door opened and the Duchess, followed by a long straggling train of ladies, came in. "Here they are!" she exclaimed.

No one got up but, as the ladies came about us, first one and then another cut in; other tables were set out, and the last of us did not disband till nearly three in the morning.

There was no one waiting to undress me and put me to bed, but short of that everything possible had been done for me. My sleeping suit was laid out so that I could almost have jumped into it, and the display on my toilet-table included a collapsible drinking-cup in an aluminum case which I had lost for years. I suppose it had been found in some recess or wallet of one

of my portmanteaux. I was glad to get it again. One mark of attention, however, baffled me. On the corner of the dressing-table, standing in the center of a neat little doily, was a tumbler with one inch of water in the bottom of it. What this was for I could not imagine, unless Welch, the valet, had judged from my appearance that I was the sort of man who ought to gargle before getting into bed.

Before I went to sleep I began thinking of Rachel again. In point of fact, although I haven't said so, I've been thinking a lot about Rachel of late. I couldn't get her out of my head all the time I was at Bourncombe, and by this continued thinking of her I have somehow gradually lost the power of visualizing her. In the early days of our separation I was continually aware of her in the sense that I was conscious of the qualities of her proximity, and my eye and ear could conjure up her characteristic movements and graces of person, and the cadence of her speech and laughter; but all that has gone now. I really hardly know what she looks like. I can't explain it exactly, but it is so, and I have come to believe that I have fallen in love with Rachel. For one thing, there was a poetry book in my bedroom at Willand's to prevent the looking-glass from swinging over, and I read it. That is good evidence! I *must* be in love. I feel I should like to have a bit of her hair. I never wanted any hair before, and that seems to prove it. It is nearly quite black but very fine and silky, I can remember that, and it comes over by her ear some-



how—I can't describe it—and all piles up on the top of her little head. She had a way of cramming it away snugly under a frieze hat when she came out to play golf, and it made her look like a cheeky boy; but it showed her neck, and her head looked so shapely with the loops of black hair, like curls, encircling it under the brim of her hat. But it's the flavor of her personality that haunts me most. I mean to see her again, by jove! And talk to her! I've thought of a few things to say to Rachel.

I was wakened in the morning by Welch leaving the room with Sinbad's drawers over his arm. He was taking them away to brush and fold with the rest of my evening wear. He returned soon afterwards with a tray containing tea, milk, cream, white and brown bread-and-butter, a boiled egg, hot buttered anchovy toast under a cover, a dose of whiskey in a vial, and a siphon. He is a most considerate soul. I really had no use for the things, but I took a cup of tea, just to please him, and tried the anchovy toast, with the result that I finally finished the entire dish.

The house seemed deserted when I went down to breakfast soon after nine. I found the room empty till two servants appeared and made tea for me. Later on, a lady who had worn turquoises that night before came in and nodded to me, and sat down at the other end of the table. We ate in silence after she had asked how late we had been that morning. Afterwards Freddy appeared in flannels. I heard him tell the tur-

quise lady that he was going to play someone a match at racquets for a "pony."

It was precious dull. Lord Richard had not finished breakfast at eleven, for I saw him through the window. I got hold of the *Morning Post*, and went to sleep over it in the billiard-room—which was the only room I knew my way to. I was roused by Lord Imagweres (pronounced *Eames*), whom I had partnered the night before. He came in and proposed a stroll.

"The Duke peppered you, didn't he?" he asked, as we walked.

I told him "Yes."

"That's the third I've heard of," he said. "He's very excitable. I always feel nervy if I am within reach of his gun when it's rabbits or the cock. Freddy—Captain Romer—declares he once saw him blow the hat off a girl's head. They were shooting the West Wood near the cottage, and the keeper's daughter, dressed to kill, came along behind the fence with a hat full of feathers; just then someone cried 'Ware cock,' and the Duke spun round and shot away the whole blooming show."

"It was a pure accident in my case," I said. "He was sitting with his gun across his knees, tying his bootlace I believe, and somehow managed to touch the thing off. Got me in the leg at four yards."

"Badly?"

"No, rather luckily; an inch more and he would have had my calf off. It looks now as though someone had taken a bite out of me."

"No wonder, at four yards. Cut a bit clean away, you say."

We were in a secluded spot. There was no one about. I have rather got into the habit of showing my leg, as the fact that the job was done by a duke gives a sort of special merit to my little show. I put my foot up on the bottom rail of the fence and stripped down my stocking.

"By jove; but that's funny!" said my companion.

At that moment the Duke came round the corner right on top of us.

It was rank bad luck. I whipped up my stocking, but it was too late. I wish now that I had faced it out and invited the Duke to have a look. I could see he was a bit pipped. His eyes fell, and then he turned and whistled his dog.

"Come and look at the setters," he said to Lord Imagweres. I joined them, feeling I was making a very bad third. It was rather a sickener. The Duke had been very much cut up at the time of the accident. He quite lost his presence of mind, and cursed himself up and down, and smashed the gun over a log of wood, and was awfully nice about it afterwards, and couldn't say enough, and altogether most kind. I felt very sorry for myself indeed, and it seemed to me that I had better clear off before I made any more mistakes. It sticks in my mind now that he probably saw what I was doing in the billiard-room. He certainly went out again quickly. Anyhow, I felt certain that I had finally extinguished my Duke—

smashed him up and destroyed him—for good and all.

At lunch things had brightened up. Some of the ladies were in hats, including the Duchess, and a party appeared to have come over by motor from somewhere. It was a free-and-easy meal, and you could have everything on earth, or get yourself a biscuit and sherry. I managed to capture my hostess afterwards to say good-bye, but she told me she hoped I would stay till the morning as she was expecting a lot of people that afternoon, and was short of men to play lawn-tennis. I compromised matters by making excuses for leaving at half-past six.

It was an *omnium gatherum* I found, and there was a gay scene in the gardens at four o'clock. There were five lawn-tennis courts, and ladies ready to keep all occupied, although the occasion was so far a formal one that the rigor of the game was sacrificed to elegance. One lady merely unbuttoned her glove and thrust her hand through. I fed the balls back to the beauties and admired their frocks, and watched their graceful movements and their smiles, and felt nearly happy.

Tea was carried about to scattered tables under the beeches on the west lawn, each with its gilded épergne piled high with exquisite fruits. It was while I was standing talking to my latest partner that I heard a voice near me say:

"Why are they taking down the flag?"

The tower of the huge house starts from the ground as though it were going to make a job of it and be a

church spire while it was about it; and then half-way up funks it, and ends by trying to pass itself off as the Belfry at Bruges. It is salient at this side of the castle, and carries a mast which can be seen for miles on all sides above the trees. I glanced up and observed the Union Jack, which had been flaunting the summer air throughout the afternoon, sliding downwards.

A minute or two afterwards I noticed another lady gazing perplexedly through her lorgnette, and on looking up I saw what might have been a long string of signal flags just completing their journey to the truck. The signal was not being made with flags, however, but with what appeared to be the family washing; and a brief inspection showed that this particular wash was confined to feminine garments of a diaphanous and exciting kind. I have to except one garment, however, which was quite prosaic; it even flapped.

From something I overheard I attributed this display of laundry to a coalition of the brains of Freddy and Lord Richard. I could see Freddy on the lawn. He kept his back turned. He did not look. I did not look. No one looked, but everyone saw. The exploit gave general pleasure, as was quite apparent, although exhibitions of enjoyment were far from being riotous. People drifted about casually, confiding their amusement to their friends with laughing shoulders and skilful precautions against the nature of those confidences being guessed by others. The garden simmered with such secret engagements for the rest of

the afternoon. Some of the guests were, however, quite out of it. They were, physically, like badly-dressed lost sheep not knowing where to turn. Nemesis was at work overtaking the serious-minded.

It was fully five minutes before the signal streamed down in a series of panic jerks. The flag was not run up again. The impression the afternoon's guests would be likely to get from the incident was: either, that the Duke's washing did not take long to dry; or, that the laundry people found they had made a mistake in the day.

Soon after six I slipped away. I had already said good-bye to the Duchess. I couldn't come across my host, but I saw Lord Richard who bid me farewell without running the risk of spilling a drop. Welch was awaiting me and finished packing while I bathed, and held my socks for me and helped me with my buttons. As I stole away in Susan I got a last glimpse through the trees of the gay crowd still thronging the lawns. I was thankful to be out of it. I didn't feel at all equal to facing the ladies' attempt to go one better.

## CHAPTER XIV

### RACHEL EXPLAINS TO ME

**S**USAN was full of beans the evening I left Yend: I have never before known her to show such vigor. It was as if association with swell cars in the ducal garage had given her a better opinion of herself. The little trull ran up hills on top gear as if she thought she was a forty horse. I fancy that the float of the carburetor has gone wrong, and I have made up my mind not to mend it.

Owing to this unexpected bounciness on Susan's part I was before my time when next day, after spending a night at Chescote, I approached Hildon; and accordingly I took a leisurely course by the wooded lane that leads through the "splash." I went gently down into the stream, but by some carelessness with the extra air managed to stop the engine midway across. The water was up to the axles and, as the muddy bottom did not invite wading, it occurred to me that it might be possible to start the engine from the bonnet. I kicked off my shoes so as not to scratch Susan; climbed out on to her wing; and, as the

radiator was hot, I took off my coat, folded it over the bonnet, lay across it and got to work. I could reach the handle all right, but, try as I would, I could not give it such a swing as would start Susan into life.

While I was struggling in this posture I heard sounds of splashing in the ford behind me, and looking over my shoulder beheld Rachel in her buggy, with Ham. She colored a little when she saw who it was, and I sat on the bonnet in my shirt-sleeves with my stockinged feet on the mud-guard, and chatted with her. She looked different, somehow, and she seemed remote as she sat above me with the water between us. Ham was restless, and she soon drove on saluting me with her whip as she splashed out on to the road.

I climbed back into the seat and fell into a muse as I pulled off my stockings. So *that* was Rachel! She seemed, in a way, just like any other pretty girl when one met her like that. I couldn't, somehow, realize that it was actually Rachel who had a moment before driven off with a flourish of her whip. I stared at the muddy water still running in the tracks of her wheels. I wanted her to return and let me have another look at her. She had on rather a fetching hat, and gloves with gauntlets which she did not usually wear. They made her hands look ridiculously small: in fact, all coarse, strong sorts of clothing suit Rachel. They seem to show off her small parts. I realized what a little beauty she is and suddenly felt quite excited. I slipped out into the water and lost



no time in starting up Susan so that I could overtake Rachel and, at least, watch her back as she drove along. I did not, however, come up with her, and there was no sign of her trap when I took my car round to the stables at Hildon; nor did Rachel herself appear till everyone had finished tea.

Mrs. Graham was all smiles when I was shown into the drawing-room; but when a movement at the far end of the room revealed little Nibbs I felt like George III who, on revisiting Tavistock after four months' absence, exclaimed: "What, raining still!" It appeared, however, that Nibbs had arrived only the day before, for a dance which Mrs. Graham is giving to-morrow. On Saturday there is to be a village entertainment got up by Maud, and I have promised to sing "Tickle Toby" in the dress of Sinbad the Sailor with my face blacked. I am rather looking forward to it. It will be a success, I think, with "Hunka, Hunka" as a follow on. Little Nibbs is down for a piano solo, and I know what *that* means. Maud is going to recite; Rachel refuses to do anything, but Valerie is to sing. I did not know that Valerie sang.

"Oh yes! Valerie sings," Mrs. Graham told me without enthusiasm. "She has a natural voice," she added, as if to excuse her.

As Mrs. Graham said she was very glad to have me for the dance, and that she had been disappointed of one man who was coming to stay for it, I suggested Bat as a substitute and Mrs. Graham gave me an invitation to enclose to him. That will make it

possible for Bat and me to enrich Maud's programme, with our special "turn" of Professor Schwartz and Herr Pipft—all quite original, and elaborated between us on numerous occasions. I have told him to bring his make-up and have asked my mother to send my own things.

The die is cast! I have taken the momentous step. The thing is settled at last for good or ill. I am going to marry Rachel. I decided last night in bed. She is a dear little creature (though she might be a bit taller and no harm), and it is wonderful how fond I have felt of her to-day—after making up my mind, I mean. I shall be proud of her, and I am looking forward to showing her to Bat. He will be dazzled, I know. I daresay she will get a little thinner as she grows older;—but anyhow I've quite made up my mind. Of course it is a very serious step to take, I know that; but everything points to its being the best thing to do. My mother tells me I ought to be married; Bat says it's dangerous to put it off; I shall not get another holiday till Christmas; I am in love with Rachel; she is certain to have a bit of money, which will be quite all right; and Mrs. Graham has been so very kind and hospitable that it will be really a pleasure to pay her the compliment.

I can't feel sure whether I ought to tell Mrs. Graham first, or not. On the whole, I think not. It would be an awkward kind of interview in any case. She might want to kiss me, or suppose that I expected

her to, and I hate scenes. I feel that she would not have asked me to stay if I were not the sort of man she would wish her daughter to marry, so there can be no positive reason why I should take her into my confidence beforehand: besides, Rachel has probably prepared her, and if not she would certainly object to her mother being informed before she herself knew. It would be a snub for her, running with the great news, to be met with: "Yes, my dear, I know. He told me yesterday."

No. I shall not tell Mrs. Graham. I have, of course, no idea of keeping the thing secret: I shall simply take Rachel to her mother and we will tell her together and joke it off, and that will be much the best way. It will be good fun, too, to let my mother suppose it is Valerie, and I have just written to her to tell her I have news for her and she can try and guess what it is. Nita will take to Rachel at once, I know; and she to Nita; and my mother will be delighted with her. In fact, there will be no awkwardness anywhere.

Rachel is a shy little thing. She appears more reserved than ever. That is feminine coyness, of course! She knows well enough what is in my mind, and that would naturally incline her to be coy; but her manner might well put another fellow off altogether: in fact she rather overdoes the defensive business. We went round the five holes this morning four times and I got the idea Rachel *wants* me to speak. Certainly it was she who proposed golf; and I saw from the very

offhand way she asked me that she was feigning indifference. It is the contradictory way women have: they give you your chance and then act as though to put you off. Once, as we left one of the greens, I began to make way, and Rachel cut me off short with "It's your honor, Mr. Quinn," and ran away to the tee box.

Never mind! To-morrow night your number will go up, my Rachel. I'll get you in a corner, and it will be my turn then, as you will find, my little darling. I positively ached to-day when I looked at the girl, knowing that we were at arm's length all the time. She does not like to meet my gaze, I notice. She knows. She knows.

Captain Druce, of tiger renown, was playing tennis here this afternoon and, as I heard him promise Maude that he would come to the entertainment, I asked him to do the cat in my show with Bat. He replied that he couldn't "to save his life," though I explained that he had only got to yowl behind the scenes, and I even gave him an illustration of what I meant. Captain Druce's superb reticence evidently consists in his having nothing to say; and he appears to be trying to get himself filled up with Rachel's ideas, for she chatters away to him, and he swallows it all like a fish.

The forthcoming dance and entertainment overshadow everything else. It is great fun. After dinner to-night Valerie tried over her songs to Nibbs's accompaniment. Little Nibbs evidently thinks that

the idea of a song is to give the accompanist a show, and she practised her effects before us in a most unabashed manner; ogling the music, and looking aside at Valerie, and waiting on her long notes like a hundred-guinea pro, on the job. Valerie's song was doleful. It represented a dying child as petitioning its mother, and the word "mother" got rather used up before the song came to an end. Her second, or "encore" song, as Nibbs called it, was nearly as depressing. It depicted another unfortunate child requesting its parent to come out of a public-house, and telling him the dreadful results of inebriation with a knowledge of the world which was much deeper and more varied than any I possess. Valerie sings in a low mournful voice which gains some effect for the songs she favors by being a little out of tune.

Bat wired to-day to Mrs. Graham accepting, so that's all right; and I had a turn at my part on the piano at a private moment as I hoped, but it brought little Nibbs on the scene at once like the cry of "Meat" to a London cat.

"Do *you* play the piano, Mr. Quinn?" she asked, interrupting me.

I told her I did not.

She seemed satisfied after she had listened a few moments, for she disappeared.

We broke up early to-night in anticipation of late hours to-morrow, and I am going to turn in at this moment. I kiss both my hands in the direction of Rachel. What is that dear little head dreaming about,

I wonder? There will be new dreams to occupy it to-morrow, my sweetheart!

The dance is over. We got up to bed at about four, but I could not sleep and I rose soon after six, and had a cold bath, and have been wandering about the garden with the idea that I might meet Rachel somewhere. I had a head on me. At eight o'clock I managed to get hold of some tea, but I still feel rotten, and I wish I could get out of this entertainment business to-night. I am now sitting in the little den which was used as a smoke-hole by the men last night. The litter is all about still, and the stale smell. Why people give dances I can't imagine. It upsets the whole house.

Rachel has turned me down. She won't accept me. I don't seem, however, to have had it really out with her. I didn't manage as well as I might have done. The chairs were all wrong for one thing, and she could not see me properly, either. She is an odd girl. If I had found her in the garden just now I should have tried her again, but, as it is, I shall let her alone for a bit and see how that will work. She will notice the difference when I don't play up to her and go away and don't write for weeks. Girls like to be made a fuss over. Besides, I must preserve my dignity, and Rachel ought not to be so outspoken. She asked me to forgive her, I admit, and I said I would; but I didn't see clearly, then, as I do now. It all seems different this morning. Of course I do for-

give her all the same, but that doesn't mean that I'm to behave exactly as if nothing had happened. I'm glad that I forgot to post the letter to my mother.

Bat turned up yesterday afternoon all serene, and a fellow named Marchland with a sister. I hope they'll enjoy themselves more than I am doing, but I can think of nothing except what happened last night.

I have just been to look at the place again. It is under the stairs where the hot-water pipes are, as you go towards the conservatory. They put a screen across. Someone has moved the chairs since we were there. The carriage rug thrown over the hot-water coil; and the pots of fern; and the chinese lantern in the passage are all there; but they somehow look shabby and stupid in the morning light.

The dancing began soon after half-past nine. Rachel was in a plain white frock with pearls and just one red flower hanging in her hair. I did not notice her dress much. Nibbs was gorgeous to the point of being revolting. Her arms were bare to the shoulders, and she was covered with powder like a chicken just dredged for the roasting-pan, so that she left chalky stains on the coats of the men she danced with. It was on her eyelashes too, and made her seem like a darling little miller. She looked an alluring little devil and no mistake. She must have been borrowing jewellery right and left, for she was hung over with diamonds and sported a tiara that would have graced the wife of a pork-packer or of a prince. You could hear her rustling all over the room. She wore a dress

of thin, white, shining silk swathed close about her little figure, with a sort of russet net weighted with gilded beads, which embraced her and showed off all the lithe movements of her body. The men crowded about her like flies; and you could see them watching her as she danced, and pulling their moustaches. I won't try to describe her hair, but directly I saw it I knew who the man with a bag like a piano-tuner was, whom I had met in the corridor when I went upstairs to dress: and oh! her two little damned golden slippers, running up to a peak on the instep with just one naughty paste button against the stocking, making her foot seem as soft and delicate as a pretty hand in a glove. If I ever go to hell I shall expect to find Nibbs there in her ballroom rig-out, just on the other side of a fiery chasm. I felt I should like to throw a bucket of tar over her.

I could only get two dances with Rachel. She seemed to have promised her whole programme. After our first dance, when I was walking her off to the nook under the stairs, she suddenly left my arm and sat down beside Beatrice Wyndacotte; and when she joined me again, with an apology, she seated herself in the hall, saying: "We shall know directly the music begins, here."

Before our second dance I found an opportunity to visit the place under the stairs again, to see that everything was ready, and the chairs placed right; and when the dance was over I gave Rachel no chance of breaking away. She is a girl who must be handled



firmly. If I am more firm in future I shall get her: I have learnt that.

"I want you to come with me," I said, as I hurried her off.

She tripped experimentally into the nook on my arm, like a little scared rabbit, and stood looking about her until I indicated the chair, and then, in seating herself, she shifted it so that she somewhat faced me. I tried to correct this as I took my seat, but my own chair had fouled the water-pipes and wouldn't come round.

"I've got something to tell you," I said, as I unfolded the screen across the opening.

Rachel looked at me seriously with her lips parted, as I could see although the light was dim, but she said nothing.

"Can't you guess?"

She shook her head.

"I've fallen head over ears in love with you, Rachel."

"Oh, don't, don't; you *mustn't*," she exclaimed, looking quickly about her as though she were startled.

"But I must," I laughed. "I can't help myself; I'm absolutely bowled over."

"Oh, please, *please* don't say such things, Mr. Quinn."

"But they're the only things I've got to say: besides, you know I do, dear. I'm really in love this time. You're perfectly sweet. I can think of nothing else but you. There's no one else I think so much of.

I'm proud of you, Rachel. I've put off saying it, and put off, but now I've made up my mind, and I brought you here to tell you ; I planned it days ago so you need have no doubts about it, sweetheart. I really and truly love you, with all my heart ; I'm proud of you and I don't care who tries to chaff me. I have not told your mother because I thought you would rather we went to her together ; let me kiss my dear one."

She was clasping and pressing her fingers, and staring in front of her. As I said this I slipped my hand under her elbow, but she eluded me in some way, and when I leant to her she turned away her head. I couldn't capture her, for the chairs were all wrong, and when I tried to shift mine it was fast.

"No! No!" she cried in a whisper. "You *mustn't*. Oh, why do you talk to me like this? Why can't it all be as it was at first?"

"Because I love you, Rachel ; don't you understand, sweetheart? I want to marry you."

I slid forward on to one knee and caught both her hands in mine. She pretended to try and pull them away.

"Oh, *please* let go ; you *mustn't*, you *mustn't* ; it's all a mistake," she whispered breathlessly.

"No, my darling," I said gently, but I couldn't help laughing a little. "There's no mistake ; it's just exactly what I tell you. I want to marry you. I don't want to be separated from you ever again."

"Oh, why do you say these things! Why, why did you ever come back!"

"To tell you that I want you to be my wife," I said impressively.

"But—Oh, Mr. Quinn, I am so sorry, but—but—I don't want to be." She got one hand free, and then began nervously untwining my fingers from the other.

"Don't want to be?" I asked gently.

"No—Oh, I *am* so sorry, I never thought it would be like this."

"Yes, Rachel, I know exactly how you feel. It's all quite natural, dear. You must wait till to-morrow. It is the sudden surprise, so don't fret: come."

"No, no, you mustn't. Oh, why do you go on." She gazed full at me for a moment, and then suddenly put her hands over her face. "Oh dear, oh dear; I never thought you would feel so."

"But you see I do, Rachel dear," I said, trying to take her hands down. Directly I touched them she pulled them away and hid them behind her back.

"You simply mustn't go on saying these things, Mr. Quinn."

"Why not, dear?"

"Because it can never, never, *never* be."

I couldn't help smiling at her emphasis. "But my dearest girl, you are not reasonable," I told her. "If we love one another what's to prevent it?"

"Oh, don't you understand?" she said, with her face looking piteous and her hands clasping and pressing one another.

"Why it can never be?" I said. "No, I don't! Tell me."

She seemed troubled. "Its so nice of you—I know—but—you see——" she faltered.

"Well?" I said, smiling at the embarrassment.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr. Quinn; I can't help it, it's really not my fault, but—well, I'm afraid I don't—don't you see?"

"Don't what?"

"Don't feel as you do."

"Don't feel as I do!—but in what way, Rachel?"

"Oh, why do you make me say it. I—I don't love you, Mr. Quinn."

She blushed crimson; I could see her neck even in the dim light. Her face was hidden. It was certainly a hopeful sign, but I was naturally utterly taken aback.

"You don't care about me at all perhaps?" I said with an effort, after a pause.

She slightly shook her bowed head.

"You dislike me, you mean?"

She looked up. "Oh, Mr. Quinn—you know I never said that."

Her gaze was so frank and searching that I couldn't meet it somehow. I sat back in my chair and looked at her through the gloom. She was sitting with her head bowed over her glove and was trying to twist off one of the buttons with her fingers. It was such a facer that I could find nothing to say. There really *was* nothing to say. I wanted to think. She glanced up at me pleadingly, I thought, and then began attentively smoothing out an end of ribbon across her knee.

I don't think I knew how fond I was of her till that moment.

The music began in the distance. She got out her programme and examined it. Then she suddenly stood up.

As I reached to open the screen back for her, she turned to me and our gaze met. The light fell upon her face for the first time. The eyes were glowing, the face looked piteous.

"Oh, Mr. Quinn, I *am* so sorry:" her voice broke. "Say you forgive me."

I did it then: on her warm perfumed neck. She did not shrink. Then I held her at arm's length with her two hands in mine, and looked at her. I had forgiven her. As I looked at her I felt quite ready to forgive her again.

I didn't mind it so much at first. That moment of intimacy seemed to bear me up, but as the evening wore on it made me feel dreary to see Rachel flitting round the ballroom with other men, and apparently enjoying herself; and I was always wondering and uneasy when she was not in sight. I was careful not to let her know I was looking at her though, and once when I caught her looking at me I felt gratified; it was as though I had scored a point. At supper she sat at the same table with me, and Bat was there too, and we kept things gay in spite of the heavy decorum of Druce, who was Rachel's companion. I did not want Rachel to think I minded. It was only a first

bid, and the wine was a stand-by. Champagne helps one to forget, and I didn't care how much of it I swallowed. Bat got very jolly too, and after the guests had gone and the ladies retired to bed we two, and Marchland, lit cigars and did a "razzle-drazzle" up and down the supper-room and upset a table. I remember Bat interfering when I was trying to take the bust of the late Graham off its pedestal to put it out in the garden. I resented the sour look with which he stood apart from our revels.

Another day has passed. It is half-past six on Sunday morning now, and here I am once more sitting in the Smoking Den. Again, last night, I could not sleep. I felt perfectly rotten; I kicked about in bed, and then tried to read, and then kicked about again till I could stand it no longer and got up. This business with Rachel is, of course, the main cause of it, but there was more on top yesterday. I don't think I ever spent such a heavy day in my life. To begin with, lest I should be feeling too frisky and bobbish, the Hon. Rupert Heronshaw, my chief, chose yesterday morning on which to honor me, for once and away, with an autograph letter: just to show what he can do when he tries, the little bounder. I found this letter when I left off writing yesterday and went to the breakfast-room. It had been re-addressed by Nita, so she is back with my mother again. Poor old Nita!

THOMAS  
"H.M. OFFICE OF STATISTICS,  
*August 3rd, 19—*

MR. THOMAS A. QUINN,

I have to-day considered the circumstances dealt with in K.  $\frac{20, P.}{N. 31.}$  and certain other matters, and have directed that you lost twelve months seniority.

You will do well to note that no official can continue to lose seniority and remain in His Majesty's Service. The discipline of this office must be maintained.

As one who remembers your father, I will add that he is no true son of that father who shuts his eyes to the elementary obligations of manhood. This office is not to be regarded as a house of recreation for superannuated schoolboys.

RUPERT HERONSHAW,  
Sec."

Short and sweet with the sting in the tail; "Prince Rupert" doing his damndest. He is a little man, as red as a fox, with a big eyeglass glued to his face, which he only drops when he particularly wants to see something. He is always buttoned up; is as smart as a new pin; stays till seven every night; never turns a hair, and keeps a tongue in his head which can flick you like a wet towel.

I don't care. The office is an old goat anyway. They can sack me if they like, and I will go to the Colonies, and make a name for myself, and perhaps

Rachel will realize that she has made a mistake, and feel sorry. But I'll never propose to another girl. I've quite made up my mind to that. They lead you on to it just for the pleasure of telling you they dislike you, and getting on top. Women are no good for anything except to make pets of, and flash about.

When Marchland turned up at breakfast yesterday, while I was eating toast and chips of lean ham, I asked him if he would do the Cat for us. I showed him what was wanted, though it made me feel ill to remember what I was in for. He caught on to the idea, however, and was practising all day, so that Mrs. Graham asked at large: "What is that dreadful noise I keep hearing?"

Marchland did the "meeow," and the snarl of an angry cat, and then the yowl of a cat in love, and at last worked up to a really good imitation of two cats fighting. I realized that he would enrich the performance, but there promised to be too much cat. We had a rehearsal in the afternoon, and as we couldn't subdue Marchland's enthusiasm we decided to have two cats to keep him in countenance, and I requisitioned the kitchen cat, and another I had seen frequenting the stables.

It was difficult to keep Nibbs away while we were rehearsing, but at last Bat, who manages her very well, and had made extraordinary progress in the one day, cried:

"Here! Outside Teresina!" and took her by the shoulders, and ran her out of the room. Nibbs seemed



delighted. Her name is not Teresina of course, though Bat calls her so publicly, and refers to her by that name to Mrs. Graham and the others.

"*She's* all right," said Bat, grinning to us when he returned. A little later Nibbs was smiling in through the window and Bat pulled down the blind in her face. Miss Nibbs, I may mention, had managed to get through the night without taking down her hair. She was preserving it for the evening.

"Why are you so mouldy?" Bat challenged me. "You were all right last night, and a bit over. What's the matter with you? You'll let the show down."

I told him I wasn't mouldy and should be all right when the time came, but I didn't feel much in key for the buffoonery I was engaged to. I went out for a walk so as to avoid appearing at tea. Rachel acted as though everything were all right. I thought it well to let her see what tea was like when I wasn't there. I had still a day, I thought, in which to bring her round.

Bat persuaded me to come down to dinner in my make-up. He said he was doing it because it would make "*Teresina*" want to kiss him. As we had got to start directly after dinner, I agreed, and we met in the smoke-room so as to make our entry to the drawing-room together, at the last moment. As Professor Schwartz, Bat wears a mane of gray hair like a sky terrier; while I, as Herr Pipft, have a bald forehead and a fringe of lank, black hair, hanging over my collar all round. We both are wrinkled and have red

noses and horn spectacles. I didn't enjoy it, however, and would have been glad to be quit of the whole thing. It was then, just before we joined the others, that Bat told me the news.

"There's a flutter in the dovecot here," he said. "Teresina tells me that the little black one is engaged to that great big chap who was here last night; Captain someone or other. I suppose it was what the dance was for: and a jolly nice dance it was too. I should have proposed to Teresina myself only I was afraid she would accept me. Come on, there's dinner!" he broke off, slapping me on the back. "Buck up!"

He had given me quite a heavy let down. I was thankful for my disguise when I seated myself at the table. Everyone was very merry in anticipation of the night's amusement, and Rachel seemed especially gay, but I could not help feeling dreary. At a moment when I was absorbed in my own thoughts I suddenly became aware that everyone was looking at me and laughing, and that Bat was calling me "Hamlet." As usual, Bat could not let his joke alone, and worked it to death. I got quite sick of myself.

"The Dane is not feeding properly," he said. "Here, I say, it's no good waiting for the cheese-straws, Hamlet. You can't make a meal off them you know."

While we were putting on our wraps in the entrance hall Captain Druce arrived, evidently as a duly-appointed escort. He was smiling at the open door, a center of attention, as he seemed to expect. I saw

Mrs. Graham looking across to where his head towered above the others, with an intent look of pleasure, as she fastened her mantle. Then, in turning, she caught my eye.

"I wanted to tell you this afternoon, Mr. Quinn, but I did not see you," she said, "that Captain Druce and Rachel are engaged. Only since last night"—she smiled to me—"but we are announcing it to-day. They *are* so happy," she added, looking again towards the laughing group at the door.

The carriages drove up.

"Here, I've lost the Prince," I heard Bat announce. "Has anyone seen a Dane about. Come along," he said, approaching me.

He led me out through the group at the door, and on the step brought me up short, and confronted me with Captain Druce.

"Let me introduce you to my friend Hamlet," he said.

Druce, of course, had nothing to say and didn't know what to do. He bowed in his superb manner and I felt nettled. However, as I stood idiotically before him, I looked him steadily in the face through the empty horn spectacle rims; flung up one arm; yelped as if someone was hurting me; danced half a dozen steps of a Highland fling with great speed and violence; span round on my toe, and walked gravely down the steps to the carriage. I quite turned the tables on Druce, and Bat, who, with his unerring instinct for personality, had designed to make fools of

both of us was, no doubt, somewhat disappointed.

We arrived nobly late to find the room filled with clean, smiling old women and some of the elder men, with a sprinkling of juveniles, and a racket of sophisticated louts shuffling and laughing in the back benches; a natural antithesis to the Hildon party strung out with bare shoulders in the front row.

The curtain went up and discovered the Rector standing before a table with a green baize cover, on which was a lighted bedroom candle and some papers. He seemed to invite applause, but not to expect it. Someone crowed like a cock in the back of the room. A sturdy farmer got up and went down the hall and there was the sound of a blow. No more cocks crowed that night. There was a good deal of shuffling and coughing while the Rector enlarged in detail upon the voracity of the church stove. Then the curtain came down.

It went up again on the Rector's announcement that Mr. Fredericks would play an overture, "The Ten Plagues of Egypt," and the schoolmaster was revealed seated at the piano. He was received with applause which he did not acknowledge in any way whatever. He announced each plague before he played it. I preferred the Boils.

The Rector next announced, "Recitation. 'Lochinvar,' by Miss Maud Graham."

Maud was discovered in a pink dress and holding a book. She declaimed the poem threateningly, and

changed the book from one hand to the other in order to perform the action of young Lochinvar drawing his sword: "And save his good broadsword (wallop) he weapon had none." The reciter here paused and referred to her book to see what came next. It was the sort of recitation one would not throw at a dog. It was received coolly.

Then the hand-bell ringers were revealed, amid much laughter and the encouragement of individual performers from the body of the hall. There were six ringers grouped round a music-stand, each ringer with two bells, and they played many tunes. The difficulty of playing in the key of G without F sharp was got over by playing F natural. The two lowest bells were, further, in charge of a ringer who required a nod or a wink to make him ring; and this seriously interfered with the time, as one nudge was not always enough to break the trance in which this ringer gazed at the music-stand. Tune followed tune, and the Rector stood up once or twice in an uncertain way, and then sat down. He was beginning to try to make the ringers stop ringing. The ringers had the advantage however. A hesitating movement among them at one time raised hopes which were shattered by a fresh book of tunes being put up on the stand. Maud then disappeared into the retiring room, and directly the first tune of the second book ended the curtain came down. It rose again for the ringers to bow their acknowledgments. They were discovered leaving the stage, but finding the curtain up they quickly fell into

place and had opened the book again, when the curtain descended and extinguished them for good and all.

Valerie got through her songs with Nibbs well; and made a great success. I think they were the best appreciated items in the programme.

Next Bat and I appeared.

Bat plays the fiddle a bit; in fact he was quite a good hand until he got ashamed of the accomplishment. Our turn consists in "The Last Rose of Summer—with variations," by Professor Schwartz (at the piano, Herr Pipft). Rachel and Captain Druce were just in front, and I could observe the way she turned to him inviting him to share her amusement.

We come on hand in hand, and bow elaborately. Then Pipft goes to the piano and sounds a crashing chord which makes Schwartz start violently, and drop his bow. Then the business of tuning begins in earnest. Schwartz goes miserably round the stage, trying to find a convenient place to rest the head of the fiddle so as to get a purchase on the pegs, and even tries Pipft's bald head in his desperation. Pipft expostulates. Pipft meanwhile gradually becomes absorbed in testing the piano as though tuning it as well. At last we are ready. Pipft keeps touching the opening note, but Schwartz hangs fire; he is waiting to catch a sneeze. Then they bite together, but Schwartz feels at that moment he would be more comfortable without his collar, so he takes it off; and this reminds Pipft that he has not removed his cuffs, and he pulls off two

celluloid reversibles fastened with solitaires, and places them conspicuously on the piano beside Schwartz's collar and tie.

Then we make a fair start.

"'Tis the last rose"—Schwartz here plays E natural instead of E flat, and though Pipft hammers on E flat to prompt him, and even calls to him behind his hand, he persists in playing E natural throughout, being so much caught up in the rapture of his own performance as to be deaf to everything else. Then the cats join in, and at last the persistency of the cats is such that Pipft calls Schwartz's attention to the din, and after some fruitless search they both run and look into the piano together, from which they appear to extract two cats.

"Why, surely that's our Felix," I heard Mrs. Graham say.

She was quite right. It was Felix sure enough.

We end with the variations, which are so frantically difficult for both instruments, and are played at such incredible speed that the effect is one of mere noise and confusion.

The thing is a perfect scream, really; but though there was laughter when the cats appeared the audience seemed bored. Bat said it was all my fault, but I don't think it was altogether, though I admit that I could put no conviction into my part. I felt dreary.

There was a sentimental song sung by the village tenor, and then Miss Farquhar was announced for her piano solo. She was conducted on to the platform

by Bat, with her last night's *coiffeur* still intact and dressed in a very provocative way; and she had the Rector, Bat and Maud up on the platform together before the seat of the chair could be made high enough to please her. It was Grieg's *Wedding March*, of course, as the Rector had announced; and whether it was that the name "Grieg" struck the audience as a hint of a facetious intention, or the sprightly way Nibbs played the piece made it appear a travesty of a wedding march—an idea which would gain ground owing to the elastic foundation on which she sat, making Nibbs dance up and down in her chair in time with the dance up and down in her chair in time with the music—the audience certainly received the performance with open amusement, and delighted Nibbs with shouts of applause; so that she immediately played it all over again, and looked immensely pleased with herself.

Soon after this I had to give my song "Tickle Toby." I was dressed as Sinbad, turban and all, with my face thoroughly blacked. I had practised a nigger laugh to come in at the end of each verse—a gurgle beginning in my boots and rising to a kind of screech; but it didn't go. I had no heart for it. I did it bitterly. I didn't want to laugh. After the murmur of expectation that greeted me when I seated myself at the front of the stage had subsided, the whole thing fell flat. Mrs. Graham was immediately below me looking at me with a nervous proprietary smile; and Bat and Nibbs were laughing together next to her.



Just as I was going to begin I heard Bat say to Nibbs, evidently for my benefit: "Hamlet looks as though he were out for murder, this time."

I saw Sir Evelyn Wyndacotte look at me seriously from the second row, after wiping his glasses. I couldn't face it out, and I ended after three verses. As I came off into the retiring-room, I found Rachel and Captain Druce there. She was talking eagerly to make herself heard above the stamping and whistling with which the back benches, balked of their fun, clamored for a new attempt; and he was standing bemused, looking at her. When Rachel saw me she stopped short, and smiled at me so that her eyes disappeared altogether.

"How splendid, Mr. Quinn. You *have* amused them."

That was a bitter moment. Captain Druce nodded to me indulgently. I felt I should like to black the fellow's face, and throw him out on the platform to do what he could for himself.

Bat, Rachel, Nibbs and I went home in the same carriage with Druce on the box.

"Jump in quick, Hamlet, before the horse sees you," said Bat, "or he'll want to lie down."

Rachel engaged me in conversation, but I knew she was only doing it to cheer me up. It was jolly nice of her, all the same.

I found an opportunity, when I said good-night, and congratulated her.

"I wish you the best of good luck," I said as I took

her hand. "I'm afraid mine's run out," I added.

"It will come in again on the flood, I hope," said she; "and thank you ever so. I know **you** mean what you say. And please don't mind about it, for it makes me so unhappy."

"It was all my fault," I said. "I was an ass."

"No. You mustn't think that," said Rachel. "Besides," she went on, "no one will ever know."

"What! No one?" I queried.

Her color deepened. "Well, no one that counts," she laughed.

"And all I ever asked," I complained, "was to be merely the one who doesn't count."

"Good night," she said.

"Good night," said I.

She looked brilliant. I felt perfectly ready to forgive her all over again if she offered me the excuse.

So that's all over; and in a couple of hours Susan and I take the road once more, with good-bye to Hildon hospitality, and a cold welcome to the pickle tub in Whitehall to-morrow morning.

## CHAPTER XV

### HOME AGAIN

**M**Y tour is at an end, and here I am back at home once more.

The morning I left Hildon, Nibbs came down to breakfast with a volume under her arm. It was her album. Bat and I were asked to write in it. Bat signed his name and wrote:

"Hildon Hall—August 5—19—." "And very nice, too."

I scribbled under my name:—

"I went to market to buy a fat pig,  
Home again, Home again, jiggy-jig-jig.  
*Hamlet.*"

Nibbs seemed to think it pointless nonsense. I wonder whether she has shown it to Rachel. Of course Rachel isn't fat, or I could not have written it; but she is certainly plump. She came running to me in the hall as if she were in a hurry; said "Good-bye, Mr. Quinn," with her eyes shut up tight; paused for an instant, smiling at me as our hands gripped; and then turned and ran off crying "I'm coming!" I

know well Rachel's little devices for extricating herself: all very neat and cunning, to be sure! She started off walking alone to church, instead of waiting to drive with the rest, although it was raining. The rain accompanied us all the way back.

I dropped Bat at High Wycombe station. I got rather tired of him on the journey. He kept whistling the first four bars of Grieg's *Wedding March*, at intervals, all day. I hope I shall never again hear that despairing jig as long as I live.

It was a cloudy, cold August evening, and getting dark, when I reached home. The geraniums along the drive were all falling to pieces; the garden looked used up. The place seemed small and strange, somehow. The sensations of coming home were very different from the adventurous expectations with which I had driven up to so many houses during the past weeks.

It was a relief to know I should find Nita in the house. My mother's persistent questionings would be hard to face out, but I was determined not to let it appear that anything had gone wrong.

It was pleasant to meet Ben on the drive. He comes on Sunday evening to feed the dogs, and shut up the fowls. I told him to go back and carry in my things, and when I got out of Susan I threw out my legs and arms and tried to feel brisk and cheerful.

My mother came out into the hall directly she heard me.

"How late my son is," she said as she kissed me, in a voice that seemed an echo of long ago. "Oh, how well he looks! Come into the light! You have been enjoying yourself, I can see. Nita! Doesn't Thomas look well? Now tell me all about it. How are the Grahams?"

Nita was standing with her foot on the fender, gazing into the fire, as I followed my mother through the open door of the drawing-room.

"How d'y do, T.!" she said, smiling, as I went up and shook hands with her. "Had a good time?"

"Well, don't keep the dear boy now. You can see he looks tired. He'd like to go upstairs, I know. Don't be long, Thomas. Supper is ready."

I felt very dull indeed when I got to the familiar room. Everything seemed to have come to an end: but I did not intend that my mother and Nita should see that I was down on my luck. I sponged my face with scalding water to brighten myself up a bit.

I carried things off well at supper with an account of the Waterburys. My mother had produced a bottle of champagne in my honor, and that, and Nita's ready laughter, kept me going all right.

In the drawing-room I told them something of the doings at Yend. My mother was so very much gratified at the idea of my having been a visitor at the great house, that she tried hard to discredit my account of the undignified pursuits with which the

Duke's guests keep themselves from getting bored; and she persisted in laughing as though I were inventing as I went along.

"Oh, how ridiculous my son is!" she exclaimed. "Isn't he absurd, Nita?"

Nita listened to as much as it was possible for me to tell them, with amusement, but she laughed out when I described how the Duke surprised my exhibition of the gun-shot wound, and my exploit at the bridge table. I could not resist rather overstating the catastrophe of these events for the pleasure of watching my mother. Her face expressed horror. She threw up her eyes as though I had utterly disgraced the family.

"But *why* did you take the queens out of the pack, my dear son? You knew it was not the correct thing to do."

Nita was delighted. She gurgled with merriment whenever she looked at my mother's scared face.

I cleared matters up by letting it seem that the whole story was more or less a joke, and my mother caught at the straw eagerly. She came over and kissed me.

"Of course, I knew my dear son would never behave like that when he was staying with a duke. But I like his jokes. It's always a pleasure to me to see him so happy. Nita," she added, "it's time for bed. Are you ready?"

"Oh dear!" said Nita, dismissing her laughter as she rose from her chair.

My mother went out, leaving the door open for Nita. We stood side by side gazing into the grate without speaking for nearly half a minute. Then Nita said softly, without looking at me:

"What's wrong, T.?"

I was completely taken by surprise. I stared at her as she stood watching the surging glow of the dying fire.

"Wrong?" I asked.

"Yes, T. What's happened?" She turned and looked at me serenely. It didn't occur to me that it was no business of hers. It seemed quite natural she should ask the question. What puzzled me was how she should have guessed anything. I stared.

"Well, I said, 'I've had a bit of an upset; but I can't imagine how you found it out.'"

She said nothing, but I knew, as I kicked down a bit of coal with my shoe, that she was looking at me.

"Here you are; you can read it," I said, after a strained pause; and I took the envelope containing Prince Rupert's letter out of my pocket and handed it to her.

She glanced back over her shoulder with one of her graceful motions to locate her chair, and slowly seated herself as she drew out the paper and unfolded it. I watched her as she read.

In a few moments the hand holding the letter fell to her lap, and she looked at me.

"Oh, Thomas!"

An air of reproof in her voice nettled me.

"It was only a lark," I said, when I had explained the circumstances. "I didn't mean any harm."

Nita said nothing to this, and I stared into the fire.

"I am so sorry," she said, taking up the letter and reading again.

She was making too much of it all. She was even being a little stupid about it, I thought.

"Oh well, I don't care," I went on. "The office is an old goat, anyway. They may sack me if they want to, and I can go to the Colonies. That's the place for men. This stilted, stuffy old country is only fit for curates, and grocers, and old maids."

"But that's not like you, Thomas—to be downhearted."

"Downhearted!—I'm not downhearted."

"But you are, or you wouldn't say such things. It's not manly. If you don't like the service you ought not to remain in it. You have only got one life to live. You mustn't waste it. The whole world's before you. You have education and capacity; you can afford to choose the work you want to do, but it's unworthy for anyone to shuffle along the easiest road. No one can be happy who has a contempt for his work."

"They're such a dull lot of men. There's no life in the place. There's not one of them that can join in any fun."

"But it isn't the place for fun. You should keep your fun for outside." She smiled.



"Well, I shall clear out of the place," I said, "and go away."

"But you can't do that until you have shown Mr. Heronshaw, and all of them, that you are not what they suppose. You can't go off with your tail between your legs."

I felt this to be true.

"I am waiting, Nita," my mother's voice called from the distance.

"Coming," cried Nita, with a momentary shadow of vexation on her forehead.

"He's such a little bounder," I complained.

"Well, but is he? He's got to see that the rules are kept! It is what he is there for! You must realize that, Thomas. Suppose everyone played about, and stayed away! You may feel quite sure it was no pleasure to him to haul you over the coals. He had to do his duty, that was all."

"Yes, I understand that"—I was replying, when my mother came into the room with a lighted candle and interrupted me.

"I'm waiting, Nita."

"Your Aunt Emmy wants to tuck you up," I said.

"My dear son, you know I am always afraid of the house catching fire. I know I can trust you to put out the lights," she added, as she kissed me again.

Nita got up, handed me the letter with a nod, and preceded my mother out of the room.

The latter, however, returned to me, after going half-way to the door.

"Anything I should like to see?" she asked, with her eyebrows raised.

"No—only something official," I told her. It would have served no purpose to show her the letter. Nita was different.

She smiled and left me.

"Don't be long," she said, turning as she reached the door.

"You never told me about your visit to the Gramams," said my mother, when I came down to breakfast next morning.

"I told you all there was to tell," I said.

"And how are the girls?"

"Quite well."

"And you saw Valerie, of course?"

"Of course—she was at home. I told you so."

"Yes, dear. Such a nice girl, Valerie. Well, I always say there's a girl if you like—I was always so fond of Valerie, and such pretty manners; and so stylish. She's not engaged yet, I suppose?"

"Not that I've heard of."

"Oh, you would have heard if she had been. You may be quite sure of that, my dear son. Did Mrs. Graham say anything about your going there again?"

"No."

"Oh well, of course, that was her nice feeling; as you had gone there without an invitation at first, I mean. So like her. Dear Mrs. Graham. She would naturally expect you to propose yourself again, of course."

Here Nita entered and the subject dropped.

I found that everybody at the office knew I had been docked. I was aware of it directly I got into the place. No one chaffed me or asked why I had stayed away so long; and even Gregory, the man who shares my room, did not ask how I had spent my holiday, and, indeed, seemed pointedly to keep off the subject. It made me feel uncomfortable.

In the middle of the morning I went up to Badderley's room. Badderley is the Assistant Secretary.

When I came in he gave me a short nod, and sat back, and waited for me to speak.

"The Chief's docked me twelve months, hasn't he?" I said.

"Yes," he answered drily.

"Does he often do it?"

"There was a case four or five years ago: six months." He looked at me.

"Ought I to go and see him?" I asked, after a pause.

Badderley shrugged. "Please yourself," he said. "Question is: Will he see you?"

He looked at me for a moment, and then turned to his writing again.

I walked up and down the corridor for some minutes uncertain what to do. A messenger who came by stared at me, and then suddenly withdrew his eyes. Everyone knew about it, then. I felt sick of myself. Well, if Prince Rupert would not see me, he wouldn't; but I felt I wanted to tell him I was sorry, and I

determined it shouldn't be my fault if I did not.

His clerk went into his room; came back; shut his door; nodded me to a chair, and went on with his work. Time passed, and I thought I had been forgotten. Then a messenger entered with a basket of papers. The clerk took the basket in to Prince Rupert and returned with two others, which he gave to the messenger. As he seated himself again he pointed to the inner door.

I pushed it open and walked in.

Prince Rupert's nose was buried in his papers. I closed the door, and waited. After a few minutes he tossed a docket into a basket and seemed, in the act, to catch sight of me. He put up his eyeglass and looked at me sideways, with his face screwed up, as is his way when interrupted.

"Well?"

"I want to apologize for the way I've treated the office, sir!"

"Yes. Right!"

He dropped his eyeglass, and his face went down into his papers again.

The interview was over, and I came out.

Pretty manners are certainly not a strong point of His Majesty's Office of Statistics.

When I told Nita about it, however, she did not seem surprised.

"It was all right your going in and saying what

you did, T.," she said. "And as he consented to see you, and must have known what it was about, it shows that he wishes to be just. I don't see that he could say much more until you have given him grounds for changing his opinion of you—in fact it was a case of the less said the better."

I see what Nita means. She has quite a little head on her shoulders, and rather astonishes me sometimes. She was so nice about it all too, and has cheered me up no end. I'll show them that I am as good a man as any of them.

I remembered to-day that I had never written to say good-bye to Cousin Jane, or to thank her, so I sent her a wire: "Home again much enjoyed visit many thanks."

And so my tour is ended. It would have been a complete success if it had not been for the upset at the office, and this business with Rachel. That was my fault, of course. I was an ass. I can see that clearly, and though I have only been home four days the whole thing seems to have happened weeks ago. If I had married Rachel I don't know what I should have done with her. We couldn't play golf all day: I never thought of that. She is such a child in many ways. Well, it's over and I want to forget all about Hildon; but my mother keeps harping on my visit there, and putting out feelers with the quite obvious design of leading me to tell her exactly what my sentiments are towards Valerie. Why she can't ask me outright and have done with it I don't know. She

seems to find ground for her fondest hopes in the fact that I have nothing whatever to say on the subject. She evidently feels that I am hiding a secret. I am bored with Hildon, and it makes me dreary—but quite an odd thing has happened. It is only something within myself, yet it helps me to forget all about Rachel.

It is nothing much to tell of. It began on my second day at the office: the day after my interview with Prince Rupert, and my talk with Nita. I got to Whitehall meaning to do my damndest, but feeling resentful, too, at the same time. I had never sat down to work in that mood before. It has always been a case of taking what was fired at me, and sloping about the office asking questions, and shoving the job on to someone else if it didn't clear itself up.

On this Tuesday a mass of confused returns and memoranda, dealing with Infant Mortality at Bradford, was slung at me. It was a disgusting prospect; and it stuck in my gizzard once or twice with Gregory tilting in his chair, and tapping with a paper-cutter, and distracting me. I had never much noticed this habit of his before. The remarkable thing that happened was that I suddenly seemed to get hold of a thread and become interested in the job. This was not till the afternoon, but I became so absorbed that I was quite surprised when Gregory came into the room with his towel and warned me that it was ten minutes to five. He worried me by looking out of the window with his hat on waiting for the clock to strike. "It's

gone five," he said, as he went out of the room. He spoke as though I had involved myself in some catastrophe.

It was nearly six before I left, but by that time I had got the whole of the facts grouped in my mind, and the paragraphing of the report set out. I had also found that the man who drew the memorandum on one section had overlooked a leading point. I felt quite light-hearted and cheerful when I got home. It was as if the cloud of drudgery at the office, which I have always tried to forget, had dissipated. It is extraordinary how interesting quite dull work becomes when one really sticks one's head into it.

I mentioned the matter to Nita. It was all her doing, and I really felt grateful to her. She seemed partly pleased and partly amused. She always seems half amused at me when I am serious: she's a queer girl.

"Well, don't forget you've got to keep it up, T."

"What's he got to keep up?" asked my mother.

"Hard work," said Nita.

"Oh, don't tell him that," my mother exclaimed, looking horrified. "I don't want my son to overwork himself. Please don't say such things."

But Nita is right, all the same.

I had intended to end here, but there is still something more to tell. I don't understand it. It's just life, I suppose; and yet I'm sure I don't deserve all the knocks I get. It's about Nita. She utterly beats

me. However, she's leaving on Monday, and I shan't be sorry. Everything is so dreary that if it wasn't for the office I really don't know what I should do with myself.

It all came about, more or less, through things at the office, as it happens. A fortnight has passed since I last wrote and I had quite got my tail up again. I had a screen put into the room, so as to shut off Gregory and his everlasting shifting in and out, and tilting in his chair. He fell right over backwards once and frightened himself, and it is the exciting chance of its happening again that no doubt keeps him at this sport of rocking over to the very point of overbalancing, all day. He's a good chap, all the same.

Last Saturday, at about eleven o'clock, a messenger came and told me that the Prince wanted me. Gregory scratched his head, and looked at me whimsically as I went out, for it is quite unusual for the chief to interview any but the top dogs, and I felt funky. However, it was quite a score for me as it happened. Badderley was in the room, and nodded to me as I entered. Prince Rupert was sitting at his table.

"Good morning," he said. "You drew this report on Bradford Infant Mortality, I think? Yes. Well I like the arrangement. The Secretary of State wants the figures for the Chief Industrial centres. Here's the list—twenty-seven of them; and here are the other district reports. I want you to throw the whole into one report in the form in which your own is drawn. Wanted in the House on Friday afternoon. Take the



docket. Mr. Badderley will deal with the draft, so please put it into his hands yourself on Wednesday, latest. Important."

Badderley nodded to me as I took the papers and cleared out. I felt I was quite one of the swells, though of course I knew that Prince Rupert only sent for me just to show there was no bad blood. It was jolly nice of him, I think. I feel I'd do any damned thing for the little man now.

I naturally told Nita of all this, and she seemed pleased, but made light of it too, and laughed, so that it was difficult for me to thank her as I wished; but it was the next day, when I was crossing the park from the office, that I felt it all so keenly. It seemed to come over me, as though I had emerged into a larger world; it was as if I had found myself all of a sudden. Things seemed to glow. I felt intensely grateful to Nita. I should have made an ass of myself, one way or another, I knew, if it had not been for her. She understood things so wonderfully. She was not a bit like other women, or like my mother, who never understands anything. I felt, too, what a gay pretty creature she was, and how comforting to a chap who's down on his luck.

And then, as I was going up Regent Street, I walked into old Bat Vernon. I noticed that he met my rather boisterous greeting a bit stiffly, which was explained the next moment by his introducing me to the lady who accompanied him, and whom I had not observed in the throng.

"Permit me—Edward's murderer," was the way he put it.

A tall erect young lady, with rather a washed-out look, and thin aquiline features, strikingly dressed in an inconspicuous way, nodded and smiled to me gaily, and gave me a further surprise by saying:

"I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Quinn. I ought to ask after Susan, I suppose? I hope she is in good form."

Bat evidently noticed I was perplexed, for he began elaborately:

"I've an explanation to make, T.—Don't you listen," he said aside to his companion; "this is strictly private as between man and man—Mrs. Vassaleur," he addressed me, glancing towards her, "is going to get something altered that won't fit any more. It's too long; and I am lending a hand, just as a friend, to get it made shorter—that's right, isn't it?" he asked, turning to her again.

"How can you be so foolish!" said she. "I'm going in here, I shall only be two minutes," and she went into a shop.

"What are you driving at?" I asked Bat.

"Well, it's like this," he explained. "It's her name. It's too long, and I'm going to get it changed. It's a job they do with a sexton and a baby, in a church."

"Then it's all come right!" I said.

"Yes," said Bat, grinning, "so far; but you never can be sure, in these matters. It's been a tough job, I can tell you."

"Did you say—I didn't quite catch—Miss Vassaleur?" I asked.

"Mrs.," said Bat.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "Then you're marrying a widow!"

"And so will you, my boy," Bat laughed, coloring a little. Then he went on rather hastily: "Why, of course I am. Everyone would if he could. The very nicest things are, without doubt, other men's wives—you must have noticed that; it's because we can't get them: but the next best things are thoroughly refractory widows. Refractory widows are very difficult to come by though, and that's why most of us make do with girls. But I tell you what it is; the widows let you sweat for it—they do. I lost nearly half a stone on this job. It's a solemn fact."

When Mrs. Vassaleur joined us, I had just time, before I hurried on to the station, to offer my congratulations and to take it out of Bat, who was altogether too pleased with himself.

As I sat in the train, I recalled the scene of my meeting with Bat and his refractory widow. He certainly seemed very cheerful, and she was without doubt an attractive woman, but she was not the sort I should have imagined Bat to take up with. She would keep him in order too well, I thought; and then I recalled the odd way he had predicted that I would marry a widow, and I ran over in my mind the widows of my acquaintance. It was not at once that I remembered Nita, and it came like a

punch in the ribs. Did Bat suppose that I——. He had certainly seen us together at Bourncombe; in fact, that was the only occasion he had met Nita. I got hot to the roots of my hair; I felt ashamed. I don't now understand why it took me like that; I am trying to set down just what happened, but I cannot explain things because I do not understand them. My impression is that it was shame. I felt ashamed of myself, and I don't think that Bat's presumption of an understanding between Nita and me had anything to do with it. I cannot account for the sensations I experienced. It was only for a moment, and then I seemed to begin to understand.

The idea was rather startling. I had always regarded Nita as a relative and one of the family, but it seemed to me, when I thought about it, that Nita was more to me than anyone in the world. There were all sorts of things about her that I seemed to have overlooked: her playfulness; and cleverness; and grace and elegance; and pretty ways. I had been aware of these enchantments certainly, and, in a way, proud of them; but always as a man might notice and admire the attractions of his sister. The whole thing seemed to re-arrange itself as I sat there. It was astonishing and I was in a bemused state when the guard, by opening the door, reminded me I was at my destination.

As I walked, I was filled with expectations of seeing Nita. I wanted to realize her. The idea of my possibly not finding her at home, took me aback. It reminded me that she was engaged for a long round

of visits in a few weeks' time, and that I had been looking forward to the day as a dark one. I began to believe I was devoted to her. She was, as Myra had said, "such a dear." I hurried to find her when I got home. I felt excited. I expected all sorts of things.

And when I came on her—there she was, just the same; serene, composed, matter-of-fact—all as large as life. It was a relief, somehow, to find her the actuality I knew so well. And then something happened.

She was walking in the garden with my mother. Some wayward branch in the shrubberies must have caught her hair, for a lock had escaped behind her ear. I pulled it, and she laughed, and bent her neck, and raised her arms and deftly tucked it away, and turned to me with a smile.

I do not understand why it was, but something in the grace of her abandonment, and the way she turned to me with her intimate questioning smile, seized my attention. It was all just Nita and perfectly familiar to me, but at that moment a sudden revelation of her flashed through me. I stared. I was reminded that I was staring by the change in her eyes: they seemed to retreat from mine, and I caught for an instant a look of almost hostility; the next moment they softened again, and were perplexed, as she turned from me. A minute later she glanced keenly at me. I felt ill at ease, and we walked in silence. My heart was beating.

I sat and thought over it in my dressing-room and was late for dinner in consequence. She was wonderful; there were things about her that had been hidden from me; there was a mystery about her. I went downstairs filled with the one enthralling idea, "Nita." I watched her at dinner. I wanted to find her out. She was just the same as usual: a little quieter, perhaps. I puzzled over her. I had no wish to chaff her. She seemed too wonderful to laugh at. She was too pretty. I felt I wanted to get to close quarters with her, and hear her talk seriously as she sometimes does; but there is a subtle reserve about her, and I was constrained, in a way I had never experienced before and I could not force the pace. It was too dark to go out, and so it happened that we relapsed into desultory after-dinner occupations. Nita seemed listless. I tried to read, but I could not sit in the room apart from her as though we were nothing to one another, for we are the best of pals. I felt need of her. I wanted to understand her.

"Have a game of chicken halma?" I said at last.

It's a stupid game. Nita seemed surprised, but she consented. I only wanted to feel I was her companion; and as she sat opposite I could gaze unheeded on her composed unconscious face, the lashes on the cheeks, and the pretty chin resting snugly upon her slim fingers, and the gentle lifting of her bosom; and I somehow began to understand her. She seemed to pervade me. There was a moment when she glanced at me mischievously, after extending her arm for some

moments, doubtful of her next move, when I felt stirred as I had been that evening in the garden.

Then, when we were putting the pieces away, one rolled to the carpet. Nita reached for it sideways over the arm of the chair, and it upset, so that she could only hold herself from falling right over, by supporting herself with one hand on the floor. I know that chair!

"Take care, Nita," said my mother, unnecessarily.

"I am! Aunt Emmy," laughed Nita, hanging on for rescue from her predicament.

I reached to her; put my arm about her; and brought her up like a feather; but I declare I thrilled and tingled all over at the touch of her. I had often, by one chance and another, touched her; but I had never before been arrested in that way. Was Nita like that! What did it mean? And Nita colored. She was laughing certainly, but this was a quick flush that sped at once. She did not look at me: I was watching her. I was filled with a feeling of triumph. I exulted. I can't explain it; I can only state that I was filled with wild exultation in the consciousness that I was a man and she was a woman. It seemed I had lost sight of the fact that she was a woman; and at that moment it was as though she came to life in me.

The end was two days later, when I was sitting in the garden on Sunday afternoon.

Nita had been just her old self, and yet in those two days I had come to see her with a different eye.

I realized that I was devoted to her, and that I could not face losing her; and yet the idea of our marrying

seemed odd. There was no bar, of course, I had made sure of that; but I felt shy directly my mind approached the idea of asking her to marry me. It seemed such an extraordinary confession to have to make after the off-hand way I had always treated her.

As I say, I was sitting in the garden. I had walked home from church with Nita in the morning and that old beau Gainsford had joined us, and bowed and scraped to her, and showed himself off in the sun like a pigeon. I was thinking what a good pal she had been to me: and just then I saw her at the drawing-room window.

It was a French window, and she stood framed, as in a picture, from head to heel. Nita. She looked so sweet—such a slip of a girl in her white dress, standing erect against the dark shadows. I was too far away to see her face clearly, but I knew well, what her look was at that moment: pensive, absorbed, and a little sad, but ready to spring to life at a word—at a touch. I felt I should like to surprise her into life again with a kiss. Then she waved her hand to me, and turned and disappeared into the darkness.

There was something languorous in her pose as she moved, that gave me a pang. Her standing there alone, remote from me; and turning with an air of weariness; gave me a keen sense of her loneliness and of our being aloof, and brought to my mind the mystery and charm of her which had haunted me during the past days. And what a graceful, pretty creature she was! I had thought, from her signal, that she



intended to join me, and when I did not see her I was filled with misgiving. Suppose she were to go out of my life altogether, as she had vanished from my sight at the window, and leave only black emptiness! It was impossible that we could always remain as friends and play-fellows. I felt that I wanted her and nothing else in the world; that I meant to have her; and that it was nothing but the habit of our established relationship which held me from taking the prize. She could help me so much. I made up my mind. I got up and went to her exulting. I did not know how I was going to tackle the business. I was greatly excited. I meant to break the ice and get to terms at once.

I found her in the drawing-room. She was standing with the fingers of one hand resting against her neck, looking out of the window again. We were alone. My mother, I knew, was "resting."

"Nita," I said, approaching her. "I want to talk to you."

She turned her head slowly, her fingers still at her neck and her lips parted, with the absorbed look with which she had been gazing upon the garden still on her face.

"I want to ask you a question," I said.

"What is it?" she asked, with a faint look of interest.

"Will you marry me?"

Her lips closed; her eyes awoke in a deep look which searched mine. The color rose in her cheeks for a

moment. She did not speak at once. Her cheek paled again.

"Why?" she asked quietly, throwing up her chin a little.

"Because I want you. I'm sick of myself. I want your help. You can help me so much; I can't imagine why I never thought of it before. You're just the only woman for me, Nita; I know it now. We get on so well, and I admire you tremendously—you know that; besides, it's time I thought about getting married, and I know you feel lonely sometimes."

Nita laughed and shook her head, and looked out into the garden again.

"I'm not so hard up as all that," she said.

"No, look here, Nita," I protested. "Don't laugh. I'm in earnest. We know each other so well, and we've had such good times together—and I want to marry you. I shall be twice the man with you by my side—I know that; and you're so clever—I've felt it tremendously of late. I want you. I can't bear the idea of your going away again, the house is awful without you—so come, dear old Nita—say you will."

I moved close to her, but she turned and faced me and at the same moment pulled the curtain partly across her body with a slight movement of her hand.

"When did you make up your mind to tell me this?" she asked.

"Just now, in the garden. I've looked up the Table. It's all right. There's no bar." I caught my breath and gulped: I felt it all so much.

Nita regarded me with an odd expression of mingled perplexity, reproof, and merriment. Then she burst out laughing: stooping forward, as is her way sometimes, and forcing it from her in a long peal which, however, stopped abruptly.

I was beside myself. It was natural that I should feel angry with her. I was perfectly justified, I think, in allowing myself to be so, but in fact I could not control myself. I had asked her to marry me and she had laughed in my face, and rudely too. It was not her usual bright laughter. It was as good as to tell me she thought me a fool. It was openly contemptuous, and she made no effort to conceal it: in fact, she tried to laugh.

"Very well," I said, "that's the last time I will give you a chance of laughing at me, if I can help it. I asked you to marry me because I wanted you, and because I thought we should be happy together; and whatever your feelings may be you have no right to be contemptuous. You have perfect liberty to think I'm not good enough for you, but you have no right whatever to be rude about it."

Nita looked far away out of the window with a cold face.

"I've a great admiration for you, Nita," I went on, "and I'm not ashamed of it; and I've put up with things from you which I would not have let anyone else in the world say to me; but this is altogether too much. I have allowed myself to get too fond of you it seems, but it doesn't occur to me that you have ever

resented our intimacy. You cannot be altogether surprised that I should have grown to feel for you as I do."

"Perhaps you'd be happier if you did not let such feelings grow on you," said Nita quickly, still gazing from the window.

I looked at her. "Very well," I said. "I'll remember that," and I walked out of the room.

As I turned on my heel I thought I heard her make some movement, but when I glanced back at her, in the action of opening the door, she was standing gazing out of the window with a white face, just as I had left her. She can look quite a plain woman sometimes.

I felt so enraged and indignant that I hardly knew how to bear myself that afternoon. I tried to walk off the mood. It is the end of my friendship with Nita: that's certain. I got home just after she and my mother had gone to church, and by the time I joined them at supper I had calmed down. I determined to give Nita no opportunities of trespassing beyond the ordinary bounds of social decorum. I made up my mind to be studiously polite, and I have been; but it makes things fearfully dreary in the house. Nita shows no wish to revive the old footing; in fact she seems more depressed than I am, and looks drawn and thin if I catch her when she does not know I can see her. She responds to my mother, and appears cheerful, but when we are not at meals she sits and reads or sews, and never touches the piano, and we

both make excuses if my mother proposes a round game. In fact life is so dreary at home that I go off to the office now with pleasure, and come back with a heavy heart. I have dined in town several times rather than face the evening at home. My mother has noticed my altered demeanor and highly approves of it, it seems. She said to me to-day:

"It is such a pleasure to me to see my son growing every day in politeness and dignity. That is what I like. I knew he would benefit by his visits to the palaces of dukes. If you take the aristocracy as a model, my dear son, you will always please your mother, remember that."

To-day it leaked out that Nita is leaving us on Monday. This is a new move. She was to have stayed on till next month, when she is paying a round of visits; but now she is going to fill in the intervening time with a sort of connection at Streatham. Nita will be rather wasted on Streatham, I'm afraid, but she is so obviously unhappy here that she had much better go away. It is just what she told me at Bourncombe: speaking without thinking and then being sorry when it is too late. I am still angry with her, and it will be a relief when she goes. Things can never be the same again. My feelings for her have not exactly changed: there are times when I yearn for her old quiet intimate air, but that's all over, I know. She has put me outside the pale, and I will show her I can get along all right there, and that I have no intention of trying to climb back. I seem to have quite taken rank

as a sort of specialist at the Infant Mortality job, and I brought home papers on Saturday, though I took good care not to let Gregory know.

So good-bye to Nita; and a long winter's work before me. As if to mark the finality of things, I have laid up Susan in vaseline and dust sheets till the spring. Perhaps I shall have another tour next summer, but there won't be any wife-hunting next time. I have let my mother understand that I am sick of the subject. Whenever now she asks leading questions, I keep saying "What?" and when she nudges me I press her as to her meaning, and she at once beats a disorderly retreat. I have learnt a good lesson, I think.

## CHAPTER XVI

### NITA

**I** THOUGHT I had no more to tell, but I can't leave off so. A most wonderful thing has happened. I hardly know how to write it. I never dreamed it was possible for anyone to be so cock-a-whoop, but that doesn't at all express it, for everything is new and different somehow. I did not imagine things could ever be like this. It's all too good to be true, and I almost dig the starting tear whenever I think of it. It's about Nita, of course.

It was all most extraordinary. I had not changed my mind about her—it just happened. The only thing was that I had begun to feel a bit sorry for poor old Nita. She was evidently very much down on her luck, and I didn't like the idea of her going away to that suburban squalor at Streatham. I began to feel, too, that though she had behaved perfectly inexcusably, as I thought, it was nevertheless I who had raised the racket that provoked her; and I felt also that some of the things I said were rather heavy-handed, even though deserved, and that Nita would go away and continue

to be unhappy, and mope in that horrible hole she was going to. After all, my mother is Nita's nearest relative in England, and she has been invited to look upon our house as her home; so that it would be fairer, I thought, for me to take rooms in Town, as I have often thought of doing, rather than that Nita should be turned out on to the world. That is how I had been thinking, and a sort of gush of pity for her took hold of me when I was smoking after lunch on Saturday. She was leaving us on the following Monday, and had not been looking happy; so I thought I would just go and cheer her up a bit, and I went off to find her.

As I say, I hardly know how it happened. Nothing was further from my thoughts than, in the least, to make love to her. In fact, as I went to look for her, I definitely fixed in my mind how I could speak kindly without encroaching on intimacy, and be gentle and friendly while I remained remote. I felt things could never be the same as they had been. It was past hoping for, I thought.

I found her reading in the summer-house. I was walking past when I caught sight of her, so that it did not appear that I had searched her out.

"Reading?" I said.

She glanced up and smiled a little sadly. Her eyes looked tired and odd. I know now that it was because she had been crying, but I only thought how her good looks were going, and I felt more sorry than ever.

I went and sat down beside her.



"Don't be downhearted," I began. "I did not mean all I said the other day, you know that. I freely admit I made an ass of myself, and you can rely upon me not to annoy you like that again. You made me angry or I should not have spoken as I did; but you were a bit heavy on me, you know. You were rather unkind, Nita. I meant what I said at the time, and it was a little cruel of you to laugh at me, wasn't it? But cheer up! That's all over! I hate to see you depressed and different from your old self. It makes me feel absolutely dreary—it does indeed, and you needn't fret about me. I'm all right. I shall forget all about it in a week or two, no doubt; and anyhow, there need be no ill-feeling. Life's too short to worry about things like these. I've got another important précis to make, and I feel that my work will be an enormous stand-by. I don't withdraw a word of what I said of my gratitude to you. I should have made an ass of myself if it hadn't been for you, Nita. You wouldn't believe, either, how work adds to the pleasure of my spare time. I had a delightful evening the other night, for instance; dined at the club, and knocked up against a man who asked me to join his party as another fellow had failed him; and I went with his sister and another girl to the Waldorf, and to supper afterwards, and had a royal time; but it wouldn't have been the same if there had not been a good day's work to my credit. I feel twice the man for it."

Nita sat all this time with her elbows on the table

and her chin resting on the backs of her locked fingers, gazing in front of her.

"Yes," she throbbed quickly, "it's all very well for you, with the ball at your feet and the world before you."

I didn't understand what she meant. Then, to my astonishment, she got out her handkerchief and I saw she was crying. She did her best to control herself, but a moment after she quite broke down and sobbed with her head on her arm.

It was dreadful. I couldn't bear it—to see her pretty neck bowed and her slender frame shaken with sobs. She seemed so fragile, so lonely and deserted. I was filled with a burning pity for her. I wanted to help her. I hardly knew what I said. I begged her to stop; to say how I had grieved her; to tell me what was the matter. She couldn't speak. I felt so terribly sorry. I thought it was something I had done. I said all the kind things I could think of. I put my arm over her shoulder; I kissed her. I hardly knew I did it; I never meant to, exactly. "Oh, Nita," I said, "can't I help you? Am I nothing to you at all when you are so much to me?"

She suddenly turned and put her arms round my neck, with her head bowed, still sobbing. I held her. I never in my life felt so. I couldn't have believed it. I forced her face up to mine. It was all stained and anguished. I kissed her again and again. It didn't seem to be Nita, somehow. It was all quite different. I never kissed anyone like that before. I knew then

that there was no one I could ever have loved as I love her. I was surrounded and caught up. It was all certain and sure; a stupendous revelation, a gigantic fact that made the whole world only a sort of accessory shell in which to contain us. I can't say it properly. I only know what I felt:—and to think that I could make her happy! There was a look deep in her eyes—I simply can't write about it.

I shall never forget that wonderful hour we spent together in the summer-house before we saw my mother walking in the distance and, evidently, looking for us. Nita became like a confiding child when she had composed herself. She nestled to me. We had no secrets. I even told her of Rachel. She did not seem to mind a bit—in fact she didn't seem surprised; it was all as if she had known. "Poor old T.!" was all she said. She smiled at me.

She told me she had first begun to like me one day when I took her out in Susan, and stopped to go into a small shop at High Wycombe to buy a scrubbing-brush for my mother. How she can remember it all I can't imagine. I don't. It must be a year ago. She says it was my voice when I said "Don't touch that pedal or Susan will have a fit"; and the look of my back as I went into the shop: but I don't see anything in that. She said it was much more afterwards when she noticed the way my hair grows down on the back of my neck. I have borrowed my mother's hand-glass so as to have a look at it myself. I think I see what Nita means—it's at the side, she says; but it doesn't

look much different from anyone else's, so far as I can judge. She says she was joking that day she told me I was greedy and selfish and conceited; but that she wasn't altogether joking when she said I was too pleased with myself. She says that she didn't really mind it in me, though she wouldn't like it in anyone else. I told her not to be prejudiced. She said she never minded any of my chaff, and liked it; but she surprised me by saying that she found her Aunt Emmy very difficult to get on with. I had no idea it was so. She said she had a very bad time before she went to Bourncombe. My mother was always harping on her ambition that Valerie and I would make a match, and in such a way as to imply that Nita was, of course, entirely disqualified in such a field. She rubbed in Valerie to such an extent that at last Nita could hardly sit in the room with her.

"Now that's the sort of girl I should like my son to marry," she would say twenty times in a week, "and I know so well my dear son's tastes. When Thomas makes his choice I know it will be a wise one," and she would enlarge upon the attractions of Valerie's youthfulness and riches.

Nita is a couple of years older than I am, and she hasn't got a blooming cent, managing very cleverly on a tiny annuity. No wonder she got tired of hearing my mother's contempt for marriageable ladies who were not excessively young, nor very well-to-do.

"I've got a confession to make, T.," Nita said with rather pink cheeks, playing with the frill of her dress.

"So you won't be angry, will you?" she added after a pause.

I wondered what on earth was coming.

"You remember those picture postcards you told me about?"

"The actresses?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Don't be angry—I must tell you."

"What's the matter?"

"It was I."

"You sent them?"

"Yes, T."

"But why? What was the joke?"

Nita sighed happily. "So now I've told you," was all she said.

"But what was the idea? I suppose you thought that Valerie——" I paused.

Nita pushed her forehead into my chest and then looked up at me.

"I'm really dreadfully ashamed," she said.

But she wasn't a bit. I could see that perfectly. It was all nonsense.

Well! She's a deeper rogue than I thought, that's all.

We couldn't let my mother find us. She would have noticed Nita's face. It was lovely; I never saw anything so glorious as Nita's countenance at that moment. I know now what a blind, mad fool I have been. I could hardly bear to let her go from me; but there

she went, flitting through the shrubbery to the house; the dear flowing, graceful figure, with the flashing feet I knew so well. And yet how differently I now viewed her as I thought of what that precious atom of life and movement held for me—all it gave. My God! I've learnt what a man's job is, and I'll do it. I can make her happy; and I'll keep her, and possess her, and hold her for ever.

I strolled to meet my mother with as sedate a bearing as my bounding heart would allow. I wanted to be alone; I wanted a sort of church service all to myself, and I felt a chill of heart as I approached her. She began rubbing her hands together, as is her habit before she makes a spring at me.

"Where's Nita?" she asked with her eyebrows very much raised.

"In the house. Do you want her?"

"Oh, no! No, my dear son, I only wondered. She's going on Monday. I think she needs a change. Poor Nita."

"Why 'Poor Nita'?"

"Oh, my dear son, you know, of course, how lonely she is—and losing her good looks, too—such as she had:—she doesn't seem to be able to make up her mind, and of course it's a very difficult position for her—no money, you see!" she shrugged. "In these days men know better than to marry penniless women—nice men, I mean; and especially elderly men."

It was odd that she should touch on the subject at that moment of all others. She had never quite said

anything of the kind before, and I wondered whether she had begun to get an idea of what was in the wind.

I made up my mind to one thing. I would not allow Nita to be affronted in her reception by my mother. Nita is a pure gem of womanhood, and a beauty any man in the world might be proud to win and wear; and I shall walk straight out of my mother's house before I will see any slight put upon her. I had to prevent a scene if I could. I knew well that my mother would be dashed when she heard the truth, if only for the reason that she would be robbed of the excitement of welcoming a stranger, for she has only met Valerie twice; and I knew, too, that she would not control her feelings on my account, nor even confess to disappointment and then try to forget it. She would pretend an insincere pleasure which she would belie by her manner and in every word she uttered; and she would persist in expressing hostile feelings, by innuendo and veiled implication, on all possible occasions. She would do this, I knew, not from any conscious intention of wounding; but simply from her habit, as a spoilt woman, of living in the desires of her own heart without any sympathy for the feelings of others.

I turned the matter over in my mind, and decided on a course of action which, I hoped, would cut the ground from under my mother's feet, and afterwards surprise the natural instincts of a human being in her. If we acted up to her own prejudices and accepted her view of the matter, the wind would be out of her sails,

and we might afterwards take possession of the tiller ; and it was in her own interest that I should do something to dull her edge, for otherwise there would certainly be a general break-up of our party. I had no intention of keeping the matter secret and living a life of false pretences.

I spoke to Nita of all this later in the afternoon. She fell in with my ideas, and so we arranged it between us. It was a delight to me to have wooed the old merry Nita back to her kingdom in the dear true heart, and the wise pretty head. The girl,—for she's a girl, heart and soul, in spite of all—is like a chameleon:—she is transformed by her moods. I could scarcely believe, at tea, that it was the same Nita I had surprised in the summer-house a couple of hours earlier. Nor was it, indeed ; nor the same "I" for that matter. Very long upper lips, however, were to be the rule we had arranged in the presence of my mother.

Everything worked out as we planned. I remained in the drawing-room before dinner till my mother came down. She is always early. When she entered the room she saw me sitting forward dejectedly on the edge of my chair with my elbows on my knees and my chin in my hands, gazing at a pot of ferns in the empty grate.

"Not dressed yet !" she exclaimed.

"No."

"But, my dear son, you will be late."

I sighed like a small horse coughing.



"Why, what's the matter?" my mother asked, standing before me.

"Oh well, it's no good putting it off," I said. "I've got to tell you. I've decided to marry Nita."

My mother gave a loud gasp. "Marry N—— But, my dear son——"

"Yes," I broke in, "she's too old, I know; she'll be eighty-two before I'm eighty."

"Well, yes! Of course! And then——"

"No money. Yes. It's a gloomy prospect. But I've done it now. I ought to get married, and Nita doesn't seem to object: anyhow, she has agreed. It's time I settled down, and there doesn't seem to be anyone else in particular."

"But——"

"Yes, I know what you are going to say, but this will be easiest. I never have the time to see enough of girls to know them properly; and it's such a grind rooting about after them. I've turned over dozens in my time. It's no good. It's a dreary prospect, I know, with a gray old wife, but it might be worse. Nita's a hearty sort of woman when the worst is said, and a wonderful hand at embroidery. We can get quite a good house for a low rent at Camden Town, or some other cheap place, and we shall shake down all right, I dare say. I wanted to tell you: you've always encouraged me to get married, so now that's settled."

"Yes; but I never meant—Oh dear! oh dear! I knew what it would be. I knew! I knew! I knew! Oh why! why did I——"

"Yes, it's a disappointing business; but it might have been worse, and we shall shake down somehow. One woman's very like another. Heigh-ho! Well, I must go and dress," and I got up wearily and walked out of the room.

"Ah! My dear son——" my mother was beginning as I went out. I left her staring at the pot of ferns in the fender.

I skipped, when I got into the hall, and then raced upstairs on tip-toe and mewed like a cat close to Nita's door. She was expecting me, and she must have been standing with her hand on the latch, for she opened on the instant and confronted me. It was a moment I shall never forget. The surprise, no doubt, had something to do with it. She had dressed herself as for a feast, and I was quite overcome in realizing that this tender, glowing, rapturous being was my own; body and soul. It was a pale coral-pink dress she wore, with something of lace at the bosom, and all her smooth body fell shimmering to the floor. And her face! The dear thing had plumped out; joy filled her veins and transformed her, and I knew who put it there. Her hair, too! And the way it crowned her forehead! And the questioning smile dawning on her lips! I would have given my life for that moment. She seemed to crush up deliciously in my arms. She is such a delicate creature when you take her:—almost fragile, though one would never think it. She was not perfumed, but she smelt all precious to me. I love her neck,—she is so gentle and gracious,—with little

startled movements, too;—I can't go on,—it is all too damned wonderful.

She laughed and she hummed in my ear and we began to waltz together round the landing; but very softly for fear my mother should hear us. We were bubbling with happiness though her lashes were bedewed. My joy was almost more than I could bear. I was mad with ecstasy. I kissed her eyes. And then we swung up against the balusters and they cracked loudly, and we had all we could do to keep our laughter out of evidence.

After that, Nita stole off downstairs. I had coached her in the part she was to play. I stood and watched her swift easy movements as she went from me. She stood upright as an arrow, and when she moved her feet shot out one after the other to clear her skirt as, step by step, she sank to the hall. I felt she would know I was watching her,—I knew she knew that I knew. She turned and kissed her hands to me and the door closed on the vision of her.

To think that I might have missed it all, and never come to know myself or her! I found myself walking up and down my dressing-room saying aloud "Thank God! Thank God!" I believe I am going soft. I found I was actually snivelling. I suddenly became aware of it. It was unmanly, but I don't care if it was; it's only because of the way I feel about Nita. I told her I had made an ass of myself about her, and at first she didn't know what I meant. Then she patted me on the back of my hand. The idea of Nita patting

*me!* and of my feeling happy and contented that she should!

Nita followed out my plan when she encountered my mother in the drawing-room. She has told me all that happened.

My mother was standing staring at the pot of ferns much as I had left her. She glanced round when Nita entered, and then resumed her fixed gaze into the grate. Nita went to the far end of the room, seated herself, and turned the pages of an illustrated journal as she talked.

"Has Thomas told you anything? He said he would," she began.

"Yes. He told me just now. Poor boy."

"'Poor boy!' That's not very flattering to me, is it? I don't think he considers himself a 'poor boy.' He has been pestering me and pestering me; and so now I've promised,—but I never expected I should end by fetching up with Thomas. Oh dear!"

"Well, of course not. That's exactly what I feel, and——"

"But what can I do?" Nita went on. "Here is this stepson of yours hanging about me, and following me wherever I go—he even came down to Bourncombe, as you know, to see me—and dragging his legs after him and looking so wretched. People are beginning to *expect* us to be married. It's no choice of mine, Aunt Emmy. I'm weary. I've had to give in at last."

"But——"

"Oh well, it's done now. Less said soonest mended. Have you seen these new 'Japanese' mantles, as they call them? Too stiff and angular, I think. No, it's no good talking. Thomas wants me to agree to the wedding being before Christmas, but I should like to enjoy my freedom a little longer if possible."

"Oh, much too soon, of course," said my mother.

"Well, you'd better tell him so, or he'll give me no peace; but if it has got to be, I suppose the plunge may as well take place before Christmas as after, and get it over; I mean to make the best of it and do my share."

"Nita," my mother approached her after a pause, rubbing her hands together, "do you think—Thomas told me, of course, he took me into his confidence, dear boy, I understand him so well—do you think he is:—really?"

"Is really what?" asked Nita, looking at her and following my plan of running her Aunt Emmy to earth and then digging her out.

"Well, is he quite sure—really quite, I mean?"

"Well, what do you mean, Aunt Emmy?"

"Oh nothing, dear,—I don't think you quite understand me. I only meant that perhaps you would think Thomas—being so much younger than you, and not older of course, and not having had the same experience of life that you have had, poor boy——"

"Well?"

"Oh, I just thought I would ask you,—that's all."

"Ask me what?"

"Oh, just whether you were sure."

"Sure of what, Aunt Emmy?"

"Well—money matters, for instance."

"What's that got to do with Thomas being so many years younger than I am, pray?"

"Oh, nothing at all. Of course. I didn't mean that."

"Well, why not say what you do mean, Aunt Emmy?"

"Oh well, dear, perhaps we had better not discuss the matter: you don't understand me, Nita,—and so the less said the better, as you say. I *quite* agree—if, of course, it can't be—— And you and Thomas are certainly——"

She stood rubbing her hands together disconcertedly for a little, while Nita turned over the fashion pages. Then she left the room in a doubtful way and apparently came straight to my room. She knocked, and I opened the door in my braces.

"Oh! You're not ready yet," she said experimentally.

"Not yet. Why?" I asked, as I tied my tie before the glass.

"Oh nothing! Only——"

"Well?"

"Nita was telling me just now;—that's all."

"All what?"

"I say Nita has just told me, my dear son."

"What has she told you?"

"Oh! Only what you said."

"What did I say?"

"About you and Nita, I mean."

"Do you mean that Nita told you she is going to marry me?"

"Yes: at least she said you had asked her, and that she had agreed,—but nothing fixed."

"Well, I'll do the fixing," I said. "What's wrong with that?"

"Oh yes, of course, my dear son, I understand perfectly; but Nita did not seem quite as if she had actually understood you,—not as a settled thing, I mean."

"I don't follow."

"Well, not to be told, I mean."

"Who's not to be told what?"

"The,—your,—what you said!"

"What did I say?"

"Why, that you wanted to marry Nita."

"No I didn't," I told her. "I said I was going to marry Nita. What's your point? I don't understand what you're driving at."

"Oh, my dear son! I'm not trying to make any point,—of course I know,—we understand one another perfectly; you're quite old enough,—and Nita even more,—to know what you intend; and as for money, well! You will simply have to do without it,—that's all."

"All right," I said. "Well, now that's settled." And I put on my waistcoat and began tidying up my things.

After my stepmother had waited, looking on and rubbing her hands in a thwarted manner, she crept off to her own room. I peeped to see the coast was clear and then ran down to Nita.

The gong sounded soon after, and when my mother came into the room she found Nita reading in one chair with a panting bosom, and me sprawling dejectedly in another with a heaving shirt-front.

"Oh dear! Why, what's that?"

"That" was a wet place on the floor. We had hoped she would not notice it. It was all through my dashing style of dancing Sir Roger de Coverley. I had cleared the table, vase and all, twice, before the accident happened, without leaving go of Nita's fingers. It was Nita in fact who brought about the mishap. She did not give me enough rope. Yoicks! I wonder my mother had not felt the house shaking.

It was a gloomy dinner we all ate that night. I sighed more than once, and Nita said on three different occasions that she thought it was going to rain. Things were more cheerful under the table, where Nita and I had a game of "Soccer" with a hassock;—score, several goals to two in my favor. My mother asked me to turn Peter out of the room, and I opened the door and called Peter, but still my mother said she was sure Peter was in the room, and the parlormaid looked under the table but Peter could not be found. It was very strange, we all agreed.

We kept it up all Sunday till just before supper. We decided then to tell my mother the truth when she



came back from church. She was evidently much depressed and disturbed in mind by the disaster which appeared to lie before us, and if we could suddenly confront her with the knowledge of our happiness, the sudden pleasure, I hoped, would go some way to wipe out her disappointment. My mother is very much a creature of habit, and she will go on thinking the same thought, like a horse going round at a circus, for years, without any reference to changing circumstances. The thing to do was to give her the right thought to start with.

Nita and I went up to her and confessed. My mother did not wait to understand why we had acted as we had. The load dropped from her mind; she was relieved of a burden of care; she kissed us both spontaneously. She called us "naughty children" for having played her such a trick, but she added that, of course, she knew all the time that we were joking.

I see the inevitable "But" shaping itself on my mother's forehead sometimes, but I pull her up at once with "Well, what's the matter—you're frowning."

"Oh no, my dear son," she says, "I'm quite happy about you and Nita. I shall be proud to have Nita for a daughter-in-law."

I have urged Nita to take the same line with my stepmother, and to do Nita justice she buckles to the job with gusto. I was amused yesterday to observe the almost stern manner in which she cross-examined her Aunt Emmy as to the meaning of some reference

to the passing of time, which I believe to have been innocent of motive. Well, it will not be for very long that Nita will have to play the adroit game.

Although I know Nita so well she is all new to me. She is full of surprises. It is always an adventure being with her. This morning, for instance,—and it is Sunday again,—she said she would show me a letter she had written to her mother when she was a child. She asked me to her room and there unlocked a leather-bound despatch case. It had poor old Bill's initials on it, I noticed.

Within, when she opened it, were displayed all her business papers neatly tied and packed away; and all the little odds and ends and trinkets of her nomadic existence. I watched her clever, active, slender fingers as they searched; and somehow I felt overcome with the sense of her brightness and courage, and of the clumsy part I had played in throwing shadows upon her; and when I saw the little orderly secrets of her lonely life laid bare before such eyes as mine, and realized all the gift flung into my bosom, I seized her hands and frantically kissed them and treasured them in a tumult of love and compassion. I am getting horribly sentimental, I think, but Nita doesn't mind. She is a little amused at times, in her queer way, but she won't tell me why.

Nita continued turning over the papers in the despatch-box until there was revealed, for a moment, ly-

ing at the bottom of the case, a large white envelope, slightly stained, and with a torn edge. She quickly returned again to their places the papers that had covered it; but I had seen, and I put my hand down over hers and made her look at me. She faced me with a warmer color, and a doubting pathetic smile hovering in her face.

"Do you mean to tell me," I asked impressively, "that you actually went and dug that wretched thing up again?"

"Yes, T."

"Well!" I exclaimed, staring. I felt almost frightened of her.

"And look here, Thomas," Nita said, holding the lapels of my coat-collar and looking serious, "I want you to send that poor man one of yours."

So I suppose I shall have to, after all.

THE END

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